

Sermons by Brian Bill-2a

PREVIOUS NEXT

SERMONS BY
BRIAN BILL

ROMANS SERIES

(Note: Exposition not available on some passages)

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Romans 9:1-5 C onnecting People to Jesus - 9/7/08

Our family went up to Chicago on Labor Day to spend time with Emily. We ate a picnic lunch, went down to Lake Michigan and then just strolled around downtown. While we were walking on Michigan Avenue I glanced up and saw a well-dressed man in a tie handing out gospel tracts to people. As we got closer I noticed that he was talking to one of his friends while he tried to get people to take a booklet. While he was joking around with his buddy, he didn't even appear to be looking at the people passing by. Several thoughts went through my mind. While I admired his courage for doing this, his heart didn't seem to be in it. I wondered if his seeming lack of interest in individuals was gutting the good news he was attempting to get out. And then it hit me that people could say the same thing about me, and maybe about you.

Please don't get me wrong. I admire this guy for getting out there with people and trying to put the good news into hands and hearts. In fact, when we walked back near where he was standing I saw a woman reading the booklet she was given. Let's do a little survey using the whiteboard. Just shout out how you came to Christ. Obviously, it was God who drew you but what tool or method or person did He use in your life?

I'd like to suggest that our evangelism will only be as effective as the love and respect we have for people. Let me say it a bit stronger than that: *Evangelism will have little effect if we don't love the lost.* As we begin a new series today called "The Promises Behind God's Plan," it's my aim to help each of us grow in our passion for compassion. Incidentally, compassion and evangelism were low scores on the Reveal Spiritual Survey that we took several months ago. We're picking up our study in the Book of Romans after about a year break as we tackle chapters 9-11 this fall. For a refresher course on the first eight chapters, see www.pontiacbible.org.

Some pastors, when preaching through the Book of Romans skip these three chapters, while others go through them quickly treating them as a parenthesis to the rest of the Romans. While we're not going to get bogged down in this section, we are going to dig in with some depth. These chapters will help us answer two questions:

- If the gospel is to the "Jew first" as stated in Romans 1:16, why are there so few Jews who have put their faith in Jesus?
- Will the promise given to Abraham and his seed really be fulfilled?

You would think that after concluding with the closing crescendo of Romans 8:38-39 that Paul would begin chapter nine on a note of joy, but he doesn't do that. Look with me at the final verses of chapter 8:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And now notice how abruptly the mood changes in Ro 9:1-3 as I read a paraphrase of this passage:

At the same time, you need to know that I carry with me at all times a huge sorrow. It's an enormous pain deep within me, and I'm never free of it. I'm not exaggerating - Christ and the Holy Spirit are my witnesses. It's the Israelites...If there were any way I could be cursed by the Messiah so they could be blessed by him, I'd do it in a minute. They're my family.

(The Message)

Paul goes from the peak of joy to the valley of sorrow. The lack of a conjunction and a smooth sentence transition shows how broken up he is.

The first part of our mission at PBC is to **"connect people to Jesus."** This passage gives us some incredible insight into how best to do this. Ray Pritchard suggests two indispensable qualities that we need to have if we hope to reach people for Jesus. I'm going

to borrow the first part of his outline.

Quality #1: Great Love

(Ro 9:1-3)

Have you heard this phrase before? *No one cares how much you know till they know how much you care.* If people don't believe that we care about them, they are not going to care much about what we believe. Or to say it another way, we will never lead people to Jesus until we learn to love people like Jesus does. We see three different aspects of Paul's love in these first three verses.

1. Sincerity.

Let's look again at verse 1: ***"I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit."*** Notice that Paul is appealing to his integrity and like making an oath, calls on Christ as his witness, stating it both positively: ***"I speak the truth"*** and negatively: ***"I am not lying."*** Then he mentions that his conscience confirms everything and finally appeals to the Holy Spirit who enlightens and informs his conscience.

Many people today are skeptical of Christians because they have either been conned or have watched a parade of holy hypocrites come and go in their lives. That's why it's so important for us to be sincere and authentic. In a stunning study released by the Barna Group, extensive research among 16 to 29-year-olds has revealed the following:

People are expressing more hostility, doubt, frustration and skepticism toward Christianity - and this is particularly true among young people. Their perceptions of Christians are filled with images of judgmentally, hypocritical lifestyles and political activism... They conclude that Christianity is old-fashioned, boring and unintelligent, and that Christians are insincere and too focused on getting converts. The followers of the Prince of Peace are thought to be unable to live peaceably among others. In just a decade, the perception of evangelicals has become eight times less favorable among young non-Christians when compared to the image held by Boomer non-Christians.

One of the most common reactions that young people have about the faith is that

present-day Christianity is no longer like Jesus intended." The authors ask a probing question: *"What if they are reacting - not to our righteous lifestyles - but to our self-righteousness?"* (www.barna.org)

2. Sorrow.

Beth and the girls like to tease me about how easily I cry when we watch a movie together. They can watch moving moments without tears while I blubber my way through them. In fact, sometimes I cry during commercials! But my tears are nothing like Paul's anguish. In verse 2 he shares some pretty intense feelings: ***"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."*** While sorrow refers to heavy sadness, anguish is deep consuming personal pain. Some commentators believe that sorrow is an intense inner feeling while anguish is the outward expression of it.

We could all stand to have more sorrow for the unsaved. Listen to these different passages.

- When the psalmist sees a disregard for God's law, a faucet of tears cascade down his cheeks as he writes in Psalm 119:136: ***"Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed."***
- Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, writes these descriptive words in Jeremiah 9:1: ***"Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people."***
- In Matthew 9:36, we see that Jesus was moved deeply when he saw people in distress: ***"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."***
- Later, when Jesus came up to Jerusalem for the final time, He broke down in Luke 19:41: ***"As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it."*** This word for "wept" literally means that he "convulsed uncontrollably."
- And in Acts 20:19 and Acts 20:31, Paul recalls the tears he shed in Ephesus: ***"I served the Lord with great humility and with tears...Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."***

Where are our tears for those who transgress God's laws? Why don't I cry for the unconverted? When will I stop being so selfish and start really caring for non-Christians?

A man said to his friend, *"I hear you dismissed your pastor. What was wrong?"* The friend said, *"He kept telling us we're all going to hell."* The first man then asked, *"What does the new pastor say?"* The friend replied, *"The new pastor says we're going to hell, too."* *"So what's the difference?"* asked the first man. *"Well,"* said the friend, *"the difference is that when the previous pastor said it, he sounded like he was glad about it; but when the new man says it, it sounds like it breaks his heart."*

I feel so privileged to serve alongside the elders and deacons of this church. This past Tuesday night during our elder meeting, I led

a devotional from 1 Timothy 2:8: ***“I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.”*** I asked all of us to literally lift our hands as we entered an intense time of intercession. Right before I closed my eyes I saw that everyone had their hands up. During this time of prayer we prayed for our church family and our community, specifically asking God to keep the prison open. We prayed for wisdom and unity. One elder then prayed something very moving. He said something like this: *“God, the longer I keep my hands raised, the more uncomfortable I get...but that’s a good thing because I’m too comfortable and I want you to make me uncomfortable.”* After awhile I peeked during our prayer time (come on, you do that too!) and saw that everyone still had their hands lifted up. And then another elder prayed and asked God to give us *“great sorrow and unceasing anguish”* for those who are not yet believers. I will forever treasure this time with these godly men.

Evangelism will have little effect if we don’t love the lost. Paul’s passion for compassion was sincere and it was sorrowful – and we see next that the lostness of people affected him so much that he was ready to take some sacrificial action.

3. Sacrifice.

Ro 9:3 is without a doubt one of the most stunning statements Paul ever made. If it were possible, he would be willing to go to hell if that would mean his Jewish brethren could go to heaven. This is the ultimate “trading spaces” arrangement: ***“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.”*** These words come from a man who loved Christ with all that he had and couldn’t wait to be with Him. And yet, he’s willing to be cursed and cut off for the sake of others. He’s using a hypothetical nuance or hyperbole here because it is impossible for him to be separated from Christ. He’s letting us in on his heart. And yet, don’t miss the seriousness behind this. The word he uses is *anathema*, which means to be condemned to total and utter destruction forever. John Knox shared a similar sense of sacrifice when he declared almost five hundred years ago, *“Give me Scotland or I die!”*

Paul’s passion for compassion seems to be modeled after Moses when he prayed that God would not punish the Israelites for their ugly idol worship in Exodus 32:32: ***“But now, please forgive their sin--but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”*** That’s a man who cared for his people.

I’d like to call on one of my favorite preachers at this point. Since he can’t be here in person, listen to the words of Charles Spurgeon:

Have you no wish for others to be saved? The saving of souls, if a man has once gained love to perishing sinners and his blessed Master, will be an all-absorbing passion to him. It will carry him away, that he will almost forget himself in the saving of others...If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let no one go there unwarned and unprayed for.” A modern-day preacher adds these weighty words: *“I don’t know how anyone can call himself a Christian and not have a concern for the lost...Hell should be so real to us that its flames burn away apathy and motivate us to warn the lost. Do we see the unsaved as hell’s future fuel? Have we ever been horrified or wept because we fear their fate? The depth of our evangelistic zeal will be in direct proportion to the love we have. If you are not concerned about your neighbor’s salvation, then I am concerned for yours”* (Ray Comfort).

Here are some good questions to ponder. How far will you go to see your friends come to Jesus? What sacrifices will you make? What are you willing to give up so that others may be saved? Do you see people as Jesus does? Do you really see them or do you look past them, like I so often do? Do you love them?

Video: “Love is Evangelism”

Quality #2: Great Respect (Ro 9:4-5)

The first quality we must have is love – a love that is sincere, sorrowing and sacrificial. The second quality that is essential to evangelism is respect.

1. Find connecting points.

Instead of blasting unbelievers, Paul recounts the blessings that the Israelites have received. This is a key ingredient to effective evangelism: Find a point of connection, not confrontation, with those who don’t yet know Christ. Look at the last part of Ro 9:3 and the first phrase of Ro 9:4: ***“my brothers, my own people, the nation of Israel.”***

He works hard at creating closeness and establishing common ground. This is developed further in Ro 9:4-5:

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.

God has given seven great privileges to the Jewish people.

- **Adoption as sons.** In Deuteronomy 7:6 we read this: ***“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.”***
- **The divine glory.** The glory of God is the physical manifestation of God's presence and was what led Israel across the wilderness and filled the tabernacle and then filled the Temple.
- **The covenants.** God made several covenants with His people, through Abraham, Moses and David. Jeremiah 31:31 also describes a ***“new covenant”*** that believers now enjoy because of Jesus.
- **The receiving of the Law.** The Law was a treasure because in it God had revealed Himself and His people had a way to govern their lives.
- **The temple worship.** Israel was given the privilege of serving God through the Tabernacle and later on in the Temple. What an honor for the people to know how to approach God!
- **The promises.** God is faithful to keep His promises.
- **The patriarchs.** Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons formed the foundation of the nation.

It's so easy for us to become arrogant and argumentative when we speak with people who do not yet know Christ. When I was first saved I was often confrontative with people, arguing points of doctrine and emphasizing points of difference. Have you ever tried to argue someone into the kingdom of heaven? It doesn't work, does it? Arguing just makes people angry.

Instead, let's start by loving and respecting people. Make sure your friends know that you have a broken heart for them. Listen. If Hell is real, and it is, then it ought to tear us up. We better have some tears for those who are headed to Hell. If we can laugh about someone going there, or just not care about them, then we don't have the heart of Paul...or of Jesus.

I return to the Barna survey. Young non-Christians frequently mentioned that their negative views of Christians were confounded by someone who provided an entirely different, vibrant picture of what it means to be a Christian. Here's a comment made by one insightful agnostic: *“I know all you Christians are not bad because I've had a few conversations with Christians I respect. Basically, I respect them because they respect me.”*

Let's begin with a focus on areas of agreement and then move the conversation to a discussion about Christ, which is what really matters anyway.

2. Focus on Christ.

After finding connecting points, then we're to focus on Christ. Look at how Paul does this in the last part of verse 5: ***“...and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”*** The greatest privilege the nation of Israel had was that the Messiah was born as the son of David, the ultimate promise...and yet they didn't receive God's provision. Jesus was Jewish, of the tribe of Judah, born according to the law, the fulfillment of prophecy. If Jesus were not Jewish he would not qualify as the promised Messiah and believing Gentiles (like us) would remain strangers and aliens without hope and without God (Ephesians 2:12).

Jesus is both God and man. According to His human nature, He came from the line of the Jews (see the genealogy in Matthew 1:1-18). According to His divine nature, He is from eternity (John 1:1-3). And He is Lord: ***“God over all.”***

It's Time to Try Tears

The founder of the Salvation Army was General William Booth. Some of his salvation soldiers were sent into the ghettos of Los Angeles in the 1920s and after three years of no results, they sent Booth a telegram: *“It just won't work. We have tried everything. The gospel is just not being received here.”* A couple days later they received a two-word telegram from General Booth that said, *“Try tears.”*

It's time for us to try tears! When's the last time you had great sorrow for someone's soul? Do you have unceasing anguish for your closest friends and family members? While it's important for non-Christians to know “where we stand” we can sometimes come across as rigid and judgmental. Wouldn't it be better if along with knowing where we stand that lost people know that we love them and that we fall to our knees and cry for their conversion? Has it been awhile since you tried tears?

As a way to help us try tears, we've put some packets of Kleenex under each row. I'd like the person sitting closest to the center aisle to pick up a packet and take out a Kleenex and then pass the packet down the row. As we prepare for communion today, I'd like you to think of one person who doesn't know Jesus and now imagine them in the agonizing fires of Hell. Picture them crying out...forever. Out of love and respect for them, it's time for us to try some tears and then tell them about Jesus so that they can be

connected to Him.

It doesn't really matter *how* we do it – with a tract, a book, an invitation, or an explanation. What really matters is whether we love and respect people.

I've spent a lot of time talking to believers today. There are actually three groups of people here today – believers, non-believers and make-believers. Which group are you in? What about your own soul? Are you saved? If you were to die this afternoon, are you certain that you'd go to heaven? You may be religious like Paul's relatives, but do you have a saving relationship with Jesus? Jesus is "God over all." Is He Lord of your life?

Romans 9:6-18 Making Sense of Predestination 9/21/08

Note: I have benefited greatly from the insights of my friend and ministry mentor Ray Pritchard. Parts of this sermon are taken from "Straight Talk about Predestination" and are used by permission: www.keepbelieving.com.

Our youngest daughter Megan and I have been reading the Book of Revelation before she goes to bed at night. She's asked me several times over the last couple years if we could read it and I've put it off because it can be difficult and even confusing, plus I wasn't sure if this was the best book to read before going to bed...and I was just worried about whether I'd be able to sleep! We're about half-way through and she's asked me a lot of questions. This past Wednesday night I decided to ask her how many questions I've actually answered. Megan smiled and said, *"Maybe two."*

My guess is that this passage of Scripture in Romans 9 has raised more questions than answers for you. You're not alone in this regard. Even the Apostle Peter, when referring to inspired Scripture written by the Apostle Paul, recognized that his weighty words were sometimes difficult to comprehend in 2 Peter 3:16:

His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

Let's state right up front that there are some hard things to understand in the Bible – like predestination. Here are three passages to ponder:

Romans 8:29: ***"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son..."***

Ephesians 1:5: ***"He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ..."***

Ephesians 1:11: ***"In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will..."***

The word predestination is composed of two parts: "*Pre*" meaning "before" and "*destination*" meaning "point of final arrival." To predestine something is to determine beforehand where it will end up. If you contemplate this doctrine for awhile, you'll have to face some difficult questions:

- If predestination is true, what happens to human responsibility?
- Are we just robots, doing what God has ordained?
- If some are predestined to heaven, then why bother with evangelism?
- How can people be guilty of sin since they are doing only what they were predestined to do?

This topic has caused friendships to fracture, churches to split and divided Christians into different doctrinal groups. Before going much further, let me give you my understanding. I have a simple mind, so I recognize that this might not be satisfactory to everyone, but here goes: *God is supremely sovereign and we are responsible for our response to Him.* The word "sovereign" means one who has absolute authority and complete control.

I love the answer that Charles Spurgeon gave when someone asked him how he reconciles God's sovereignty and human responsibility: *"I wouldn't try,"* he replied, *"I never reconcile friends."*

You can find both of these friends in the Bible. In fact, we could say that Romans 9 emphasizes the sovereignty of God while Romans 10 provides the framework for human responsibility. However, Paul doesn't seek to relieve the tension because they are friends. He doesn't fully explain the working out of election and responsibility in this chapter because he's more interested in addressing the haughty heart that dares to question the Creator.

Election and responsibility are taught by Jesus in John 6:37: ***"All that the Father gives me will come to me,* [divine election] ***and whoever comes to me*** [human response] ***I will never drive away."*** Here are just two verses from Acts 13 where these two friends are found: Verse 39: ***"Through him everyone who believes is*** [human response] ***justified"*** and verse 48: ***"...and all who were*****

appointed [divine election] **for eternal life believed.”**

In his commentary on Romans, John Stott offers this quote from Charles Simeon, who lived during the time when the Calvinist-Arminian controversy was quite bitter. He warned his congregation of the dangers of forsaking Scripture in favor of a theological system: *“When I come to a text which speaks of election, I delight myself in the doctrine of election. When the apostles exhort me to repentance and obedience, and indicate my freedom of choice and action, I give myself up to that side of the question”* (Stott, page 278).

I like how **Ray Pritchard** puts it:

God is in charge of what happens, when it happens, how it happens, why it happens, and even what happens after it happens. This is true of all events in every place from the beginning of time. He does this for our good and His glory. He is not the author of sin, yet evil serves His purposes. He does not violate our free will, yet free will serves His purposes. We're not supposed to understand all this. We're simply to believe it.

Questions and More Questions

With all that as a “predestined preview” of our passage for today, would you please turn to Romans 9:19-29? The first thing I want you to notice is that there are seven different questions listed in verses 19-24. I've underlined the question marks:

One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory— even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

While Paul doesn't specifically answer each of these questions, there are at least three answers that are given.

1. God designs with purpose (Ro 11:19-21).

Let's look at what's behind Romans 9:19: ***“One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’”*** The word “then” goes back to the question about Pharaoh. Specifically, as we learned last week, when Moses wanted to go, Pharaoh said no. Since Pharaoh was hardened and Ro 11:18 states: ***“God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens whom He wants to harden,”*** then why are we blamed for our behavior? If we are simply playing the roles God has for us in the outworking of His will, how can God judge us for resisting His will? Paul takes issue with the attitude behind the two questions in verse 19 and so he replies in Ro 11:20: ***“But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?”*** The phrase ***“talk back”*** literally means “to answer to one's face” or to “be against and away from.” Paul was putting this person in his place.

When I was in high school I remember asking my mom if I could go somewhere with my friends. When I asked her if I could go, she said no. I then peppered her with a whole bunch of other questions that started with *why* but she wasn't about to change her mind. I became so angry that I said something very disrespectful to her. My words were terrible and my sense of timing was even worse because at that exact moment my dad walked into the room. I'll spare you the details but suffice it say that my dad put me in my place in no uncertain terms. I didn't talk back to my mom again...at least for awhile.

Paul is putting this questioner in his place. Notice that it's not the fact that a question is asked; it's the attitude behind the question that's inappropriate. It's not wrong to ask questions of the Almighty but we cannot presume to correct Him. I'm reminded of what God said in Job 38:2-3:

Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.”

Job is put in his place in 40:2:

Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!”

I love how Job responds in Job 30:4-5:

I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more.

Friends, when God declares His will, we should be still. That's hard for us because many of us want to have the last word with God.

Pulling together passages from Isaiah 28:16, Isaiah 64:8 and Jeremiah 18:1-6, Paul shows that as Creator, God has the absolute

rights of ownership. The Creator can do whatever He wants with the created: ***“Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”*** Then, expanding the analogy of the Potter and the clay, Paul describes the absurdity of a piece of pottery complaining to the Potter: ***“Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”*** Friends, you and I are clay. And clay has no right to complain. Clay has no qualifications to talk back to the Creator. God can take and make pretty pottery and He can also turn the clay into something common and ordinary. The point is that the Creator can do whatever He wants with that which He has created. MacArthur adds, *“To fully understand God, we would have to be equal to the God who made us – a notion even more absurd than a clay pot’s being equal to the potter who molded it.”*

Genesis 2:7 says that we are formed from the dust of the ground, but we are designed with a purpose. Paul’s readers would have known that the image of the Potter and the clay typically referred to God and Israel in the Old Testament. Keeping the larger context of Romans in mind, Paul is speaking about Israel and her failure to accept Jesus as Messiah. The ***“same lump of clay”*** represents humanity as a whole. If God wants to only save a remnant, and the Creator wants to add a bunch of Gentile pottery, isn’t that His right?

2. God delays punishment (Ro 11:22-23).

God designs with a purpose and He also delays punishment to some in order to show His mercy to others. Let’s look next at Ro 11:22-23:

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory...

Notice the two uses of the phrase, ***“What if...”*** Paul is introducing two categories of people here. The Bible often uses extreme terms to separate people into two distinct groups – the saved and the lost, children of God and children of Satan, light and darkness. Here he uses two quite descriptive categories: ***“objects of his wrath”*** and ***“objects of his mercy.”*** Let’s look at each one.

Objects of wrath.

Romans 1:18 says that ***“the wrath of God is being revealed...against all the godlessness and wickedness of men...”*** We don’t like to talk about the wrath of God but we must because the Bible does. I want you to notice however, that God ***“bore with great patience the objects of his wrath.”*** God is patient and His divine delay in delivering justice is so that people will repent and receive salvation. This is spelled out in 2 Peter 3:9: ***“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”*** Because of our sin we all deserve the wrath of God but there’s a way out.

This is a tough passage, isn’t it? Do you see the phrase, ***“prepared for destruction?”*** It’s helpful to know that the grammatical construction is in the “passive voice,” which shows that people prepare themselves for destruction because of their sins. It’s not that God makes people sinful but that He leaves them in their sin unless they repent and receive Jesus. If people resist and reject God, they end up preparing their own destruction. If, during the time of divine delay, an individual repents and receives Jesus, he or she becomes an ***“object of mercy.”*** Ezekiel 18:32 says: ***“For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”***

Objects of mercy.

Did you know that God gets the glory either way? He even uses Israel’s unbelief to further His purposes. Actually, He uses all circumstances to promote His glory. Look at Ro 11:23: ***“What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for glory...”*** The grammatical construction here is different – we don’t prepare ourselves for glory, because we are ***“prepared in advance for glory”*** by God.

Which group are you in today? You are either an object of wrath prepared for destruction or you are an object of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for His glory. Friends, not everyone is going to heaven. Left to ourselves, we’ll all go to hell. No one deserves heaven. If we go to heaven it’s because someone else paid the price for admission. Mercy means accepting something you don’t deserve. God is delaying His judgment so that you will repent and receive Jesus. But He won’t wait forever.

3. God determines to show mercy (Ro 11:24-29).

First, God designs with purpose; second, He delays punishment. Finally, He does all this because He determines to show mercy. Verse 24 states that God does this among the Jews and the Gentiles:

Even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

A group of creative people met this past Tuesday night to give some strategic attention to our Sunday services. We spent time reading Romans 9-11 and then we brainstormed some ways that we thought we could design our Sunday services to help us better understand and apply the Scriptures to our lives. One participant made a comment in which she thinks that a lot of people are confused about what it means to be a Jew and what it means to be a Gentile. I was hoping Pastor Jeff or Pastor Dick could clear this up for you but since I'm on today I'll give it a shot.

Out of all the people in the world, God decided to choose one group of people with whom to reveal Himself and to begin His work of redemption, which means to buy back that which has been lost. He also chose one central place, the country of Israel, from where He would launch His love to the whole world. Right from the very beginning God's heart has been for His "chosen people" to reach out to the Gentiles with the message of God. A Gentile is anyone who is not Jewish – that's us.

Unfortunately, they didn't obey this command and allowed pride and spiritual indifference to enter their lives. They made at least two mistakes: First, they thought that just because they were born Jewish, they were in God's kingdom. Second, they didn't take God's Word to the nations. What Paul is doing here in Romans 9-11 is showing that salvation is not just for the Jews, but for the whole world. He's also reminding his readers that God has always called out a remnant from the Jews.

Today there are approximately 13 million Jews in the world out of a total population of 6.7 billion people. If God had said, "I'm only going to the Jews," He would still be fair because no one deserves to be saved. But He didn't do that. Instead, He opened the door of salvation to everyone – we'll get to that in chapter 11. But He did so by first offering it to the Jews – that's why Jesus was Jewish. Will there be any Jewish people in heaven? Absolutely. But not every Jewish person goes to heaven. Will there be any Gentiles in heaven? Absolutely. But not every Gentile goes to heaven. The only way there is through faith in Jesus.

Quoting from two Old Testament prophets, Paul builds the case for God's mercy.

- **God receives Gentiles into His family.** Using words from the prophet Hosea, Paul says in Ro 11:25-26:

I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'

This shows that it's not a new thing for God to add Gentiles to His family. Do you see the centrality of God's work here? Note the phrase: "***I will call...***" repeated twice and that these former pagans are called "***sons of the living God.***"

- **God redeems a remnant from Israel.** Not only will Gentiles become full members of God's family, many Jews will be left out. Drawing from Isaiah, in Ro 11:27-29, Paul summarizes that those Jews who respond in faith become part of the remnant:

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.' It is just as Isaiah said previously: 'Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.'

True believers are always a minority. Paul is reminding those with a Jewish background that they might not make it in, and they better repent quickly if they want to be part of the remnant because God is carrying out His sentence with "***speed and finality.***" Like He did with Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction will be total, and only a handful will be saved.

Divine Election and Human Responsibility

Let's come back to the statement I made at the beginning: *God is supremely sovereign **and** we are responsible for our response to Him.*

1. God is supremely sovereign.

Salvation starts with God and ends with God. If predestination is true, it means that we can never claim any credit for our salvation. We don't even get points for seeking the Lord because he sought us before we sought him. Harry Ironside told of a prayer meeting where a man gave a stirring testimony of God's grace in his life. Afterwards someone came up to him and said, "*My brother, that was a fine testimony you gave. You talked a lot about God, but you didn't mention your own part in salvation.*" The man thought for a moment and then said, "*You're right. I did leave that out. My part was to run away from God as fast as I could, and God's part was to*

run after me until he caught me." So it is with all of us. We do the running away and God does the catching. We're in charge of being lost. God is in charge of saving us.

2. I'm responsible to respond.

Someone may say, *"Why should I bother responding? If I'm predestined, God will save me when he's ready."* The Bible says that God saves those who place their faith in Jesus Christ. Henry Ward Beecher used to say that the elect were the *"Whosoever wills"* and the non-elect were the *"Whosoever won'ts."* If you are wondering whether God has predestined you to salvation, just answer this question: Have you ever placed your faith in Jesus Christ—and in him alone—for your salvation? If the answer is yes, then you're predestined for heaven. But what if the answer is no. Or what if you're not sure? One reason God has delayed his punishment is to give you more time to be saved. If you go to hell, it won't be God's fault. He's done everything necessary to make sure you go to heaven.

Here are two points to help us resolve, or at least live with this tension. First, from our human standpoint, we are completely free. When you wake up in the morning, you have a choice to get out of bed or to stay in bed. You can wear shorts or pants. When you get in your car, you're free to drive to work or you can head to Wisconsin if you like. Every decision you make is a free choice.

That leads to the second point: Predestination simply means, God chose you first and if he didn't choose you first, you would never have chosen him. To say it another way, God so arranged the circumstances that when the moment was right, you had no other choice but to freely choose Jesus. Our choice is a free choice, but it is made possible only by God's Spirit enabling us to believe and be saved.

Think of the gate of heaven, and above it is a large sign that reads, *"Whosoever will may come."* As you pass through the gate, you look back and from the inside the sign reads this way, *"Chosen before the foundation of the world."* Or to say it yet another way: *"He doesn't make you go against your will; he just makes you willing to go."* Friend, here's some good news. No one has to go to Hell. If you go there, it will be because you are a sinner deserving of God's judgment. How do you know if God is calling you? If you have the slightest desire, then God is calling you. If you want to be saved, then Jesus is calling you to follow Him.

If you want to be saved, you can be saved and you will be saved. That is the promise of God to you. No one will ever be lost who turned to Christ for salvation. No one will be in hell who truly wanted to go to heaven by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Did you know that there's only one instance in the Bible where someone cried out for mercy and was turned down? Every other time when someone wanted mercy, they received it. The only time it didn't come was when it was too late. In Luke 16:19-31, a rich man dies and is in incredible agony. Listen to verses 23-24: ***"In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me...for I am in agony in this flame.'"*** His request was denied because the deadline had passed – it's too late to ask after you die.

3. I'm responsible to tell others.

Some Christians, when pondering God's divine election have elected to not be involved in evangelism because they believe that God will save those He wants to save without any help from us. In his outstanding book called, "Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God,"

J. I. Packer writes this:

They must be told of Christ before they can trust Him, and they must trust Him before they can be saved by Him. Salvation depends on faith, and faith on knowing the gospel. God's way of saving sinners is to bring them to faith through bringing them into contact with the gospel. In God's ordering of things, therefore, evangelism is a necessity if anyone is to be saved at all. We must realize, therefore, that when God sends us to evangelize, He sends us to act as vital links in the chain of His purpose for the salvation of His elect."

Pastor Jeff shared an illustration about election and evangelism that is very good. I'd like him to come up and explain it to us now. [We don't know who the "sheep" are so we must go up to people and say, "Bah." If they answer with a "bah," then they're part of God's family]

4. Give your life to the Potter's hand.

Are you presuming upon God's patience? You don't have to have God figured out before you follow Him by faith. The key question among all the questions is this: *Have you given your life to the Potter's hand?*

Please take the piece of clay that you were given at the beginning of the service right now. Just leave it in the baggie and start forming it and shaping it. Imagine now that you are that piece of clay and the Creator is shaping you just the way He wants.

As we close, we're going to watch a video and as we do, ask yourself this question: *Have I given my life to the Potter's hand?*

Video: "Clay" (www.godtube.com)

Romans 9:6-18 Trusting What God Says - 9/14/08

Note: I have benefited greatly from the insights of my friend and ministry mentor Ray Pritchard. Parts of this sermon are taken from "God's Word Has Not Failed" and are used by permission: www.keepbelieving.com.

In May 1995, Randy Reid, a 34-year-old construction worker, was welding on top of a nearly completed water tower outside Chicago. He unhooked his safety gear to reach for some pipes when a metal cage slipped and bumped the scaffolding he stood on. The scaffolding tipped, and Reid lost his balance. He fell 110 feet, landing face down on a pile of dirt, just missing rocks and construction debris. When paramedics arrived, they found Reid conscious, moving, and complaining of a sore back. Apparently the fall didn't cost Reid his sense of humor. As paramedics carried him on a backboard to the ambulance, he had just one request: *"Don't drop me."* (Source: Greg Asimakoupoulos)

I suspect that some of you feel that way today. Even though He has saved you from the big fall, you wonder if perhaps God is going to drop you as you struggle with trusting Him. Will God really come through for you? Can you and I really trust Him to keep His promises? Let's take this to a deeper level and let me verbalize three questions that many of us have asked at one time or another.

- **Has God's Word failed?** This has to do with his power.
- **Is God faithful?** This has to do with His promises.
- **Is God fair?** This has to do with His purposes.

Last week we learned that *evangelism will have little effect if we don't love the lost*. Following the example of Paul in Romans 9:1-5, we must cultivate two qualities. First, we're to have a love that is sincere, sorrowing, and sacrificial. Second, we must treat people with great respect as we look for points of connection so we can point them to Christ. We passed out Kleenexes as a reminder that God wants us to cry for the unconverted. As one woman left the service she showed me her Kleenex – it was covered in makeup and was wet from her tears. Let's take a few minutes to hear from a couple of you. How did you sorrow for the unsaved this past week?

As we move into the bulk of Romans 9 this morning, let me warn you up front that this section of Scripture may be hard to swallow. In light of that, let's keep Isaiah 55:8-9 in mind:

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

It's my prayer that by the time we're finished today, you'll be more willing to trust the God who will never drop you.

In the Apostle Paul's day, many people were wondering if God had somehow dropped the Israelites because so few of them had put their trust in Jesus as their Messiah. I like how Pastor Larry Sarver explained why this was such an issue to people back then:

Imagine a situation where a certain man is the founder and owner of a large, profitable corporation. This man has many children in his family, and he makes a general promise: 'My children will always have a seat on the Board of Directors of my company and nobody but my children will have a place on the Board of Directors.' This is his promise, this is his word. Now suppose many years after making this promise some of those who received this promise were not placed on the Board of Directors while at the same time this man went and got people living on the streets and made them his Board members. Wouldn't it seem that he had not kept his word? Wasn't it unfair to place people from the streets on the Board instead of those who had grown up in his own home?

"This imaginative situation is very similar to the real situation for the Israelites. The Gospel Paul proclaimed made clear that many Jews would not be included in God's promised blessings and that many Gentiles would be included. To them it seemed that, if this were true, God was being unfaithful and unfair. After all, God had promised that the descendants of Abraham would be the recipients of these blessings. In a sense, they felt that God owed them or was obligated to them. Paul writes chapters 9-11 to address these concerns and to explain that God is faithful, God is fair, and that God owes no one anything." (www.semoncentral.com)

I might add that this promise was to His children – it's just that not all of Israel was in fact, part of His family – and Gentiles who received Christ were. Paul hits this head on in the first part of verse 6: ***"It is not as though God's Word had failed"*** The word "failed" means to *"fall out of, to fall down, or to drop."* God's word will never hit the ground. It also means that God's Word will never fall powerless. This is the main point of the entire chapter. No matter how disappointed we may be, God's Word has not failed, nor will it ever fail.

Numbers 23:19 puts it this way: ***“Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”***

Isaiah 55:11: ***“So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”***

Jesus stated it strongly in John 10:35: ***“...the Scripture cannot be broken.”***

God's Word will not and cannot fail but that leads to two crucial questions:

- **Is God free to do whatever he wants?**
- **Is God fair in the way he treats people?**

Before we dive in, let me insert a couple sidebar points.

- **The doctrine of divine election will be introduced today and will be fleshed out in subsequent sermons** This is by no means the final word but this truth cannot be dismissed or denied. I urge you to put aside any preconceived prejudices or theological theories so we can just let the Scriptures speak as we seek to get to know God better. Our first focus should be this question: *“What does the Bible say?”* before we ask the follow-up question: *“How can this be so?”*
- **Paul's examples come from the Old Testament** Many of us know more about Barack and Joe, and John and Sarah than we do about Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Esau, Moses and Pharaoh. Paul is assuming that his readers are familiar with these Old Testament characters. I encourage you to read more about these key personalities from the Bible this next week.

God's Freedom Seen In ...

1. His choice of Isaac over Ishmael. Look at Romans 9:6-9:

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. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated, 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.'

Paul gives us an answer right away about the possibility of God's Word failing. In fact, he answers it three different ways to show that spiritual Israel is a smaller subset of physical Israel. There has always been a smaller remnant inside the larger group. God's promise was never meant to be realized in the entire nation, but only in the true (elect) Israel within Israel. Here's how he says it:

- ***For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.***
- ***Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.***
- ***It is not the natural children who are God's children.***

Paul said it this way earlier in the book of Romans, in 2:28: ***“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly.”*** This is contrary to what most Jews believe – they think they're in just because of their ethnicity. Let me demonstrate using the whiteboard. This large circle represents physical Israel while this small circle in the middle of the larger circle represents spiritual Israel.

This passage reminds us that although Abraham was the father of Ishmael and Isaac—only one son (Isaac) was the son of the promise. *One was chosen and the other was passed over by God*

There's only one difficulty with this illustration. Isaac was the son of Abraham and his wife Sarah, while Ishmael was the son of Abraham and Sarah's handmaiden Hagar. Paul next moves from the example of two half-brothers to twin brothers.

2. His choice of Jacob over Esau.

Let's look now at Ro 11:10-13:

Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father 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.' Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'

We don't have time this morning to go into a detailed description of the relationship between Esau and Jacob, but I do want to hit a few highlights. Isaac married Rebekah and when she became pregnant she realized that she had twins within her. Even before they were born they started fighting. Rebekah wanted to know why this was happening so she went to the Lord for the answer. Listen to

God's response in Genesis 25:23:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.

God is establishing that even before the twins were born, the younger was elected to be exalted in order to promote God's purposes. The word "election" means *"to select out from a number, to pick out."* He could just as easily have chosen Esau over Jacob. They were twins and Esau was older, which means that by all customary rights and privileges he should have been the main heir of the father's blessings. But God chose Jacob.

Many people have stumbled over Romans 9:13, which is a quote from Malachi 1:3: ***"Jacob I loved but Esau I hated..."*** Here are a few things to remember that may help us understand the meaning of this strong statement.

- **In his heart, Jacob hungered after God.** Even though he was a schemer and a scoundrel, as he matured in his faith, he grew to trust God. Esau, on the other hand, placed no value on spiritual matters. He despised his birthright and treated God with utter indifference. Having said all that, one cannot get past the fact that God did this choosing *before* they were even born.
- **Many commentators suggest that the words *love* and *hate* should be used in a relative sense.** In the Hebrew idiom, if a father had two sons and gave one the inheritance it was said that he loved one and hated the other. God loved Jacob so much that, in comparison, it seemed as if He hated Esau, or loved him less. Jesus presented this same idea in relation to following Him. In Luke 14:26, He states that in order to be His disciples we must "hate" our family and self. He's not saying that we should actually "hate" family members but that we should *love them less* as clarified in Matthew 10:37: ***"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."***
- **We must avoid accusing God of injustice.** The love/hate contrast is used to illustrate God's sovereign election and we can't get away from the biblical doctrine that He elects and chooses in order to carry out His plans. Deuteronomy 32:4: ***"He is the Rock, His words are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He."***
- **God's purposes always promote His glory, even if we don't understand what He is doing.** The real question is not why God rejected Esau but why he chose Jacob. He elected to lavish mercy on the deceiver Jacob, even though he deserved justice. Esau simply received what was coming to him. Without mercy Jacob would have been passed over as well. Likewise, we are all born objects of God's wrath (Ephesians 2:3). It's only through His electing love that we receive mercy. Everything comes back to God and no one deserves salvation. If you got what you deserved, you would go to hell. And so would I.

The amazing miracle is that God saves anyone. No one deserves it. Why some are chosen and others are not is the mystery of mercy. But if you are saved, remember this: *You don't deserve it.* God didn't choose you because of your good looks or your good life. Your religious background had nothing to do with it. Your intellect mattered not at all to Him. If you are a Christian, it is because of God's free grace and marvelous mercy—and nothing else at all.

That's why He's called God. He can do whatever he likes. He's God and we're not. Let's pause here and ponder this for a moment. Some of you have a huge struggle with God's sovereignty. Are you angry toward the Almighty about something that's happened to you? Have you allowed some bitterness to come between you and Him? It's time to get this straightened out. Are you ready to settle this right now?

We come now to the second crucial question: Is God fair in the way He treats people? The answer again is yes—although it may not seem fair at first glance.

God's Fairness Seen In ...

1. His mercy to Moses. Let's continue in Ro 11:14-16:

What shall we say then? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

Should we even entertain the possibility that God might be unjust? The answer Paul gives is literally translated, *"God forbid! Perish the thought!"* God is totally fair and his justice is not tarnished by divine election. Moses wasn't a very likely candidate—but God chose him. He didn't choose to be a great deliverer. It was God's plan and purposes that made Moses what he was. God chose to show mercy to a man who didn't particularly deserve it. Friends, God does not show mercy to us because of our will or our works either.

2. His justice to Pharaoh. We see this in Ro 11:17-18:

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Let's remember two facts about Pharaoh: *First, he was a pagan and never becomes a believer. Second, Pharaoh hardened his own heart ten times against the Lord.*

God raised up Pharaoh as the ruler of Egypt. When Moses said, "Let my people go," Pharaoh said, "No." Not just once but over and over again. So God used his stubbornness as the backdrop against which he displayed his power to the entire world in the 10 plagues.

Is that fair? Sure it is. Pharaoh got what he deserved—total destruction in the Red Sea. Think of it this way. Did Moses deserve mercy? No, but he received it anyway. Did Pharaoh deserve mercy? No, he deserved God's justice. And that's what he received. Don't miss the stated reason behind His mercy to Moses and His justice to Pharaoh -- God's power was put on display so that ***"His name might be proclaimed in all the earth."*** The word "proclaimed" means to announce everywhere, to publish abroad. I'm excited for our "Go Global" mission's festival coming up in 35 days! I trust that you will take full advantage of all that will be offered and that your family is already using the booklet to become more familiar with the four missionary couples who will be with us.

The case is settled. *God is completely free to do whatever he wants. And he is completely fair in the way he treats each person. We all deserve God's judgment. The fact that anyone receives God's mercy is nothing short of a miracle.*

Making It Personal

When you stand back and survey this passage, it is easy to understand why some commentators call it one of the most difficult in the entire Bible. It raises many questions about God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Let me close by making five summary statements.

1. It humbles us by putting us in our proper place.

Salvation begins with God, not with us. We often talk about freewill as if that were the central issue of life, but these verses ignore it altogether. Don't get me wrong. The Bible does teach that we all have choices to make, and we'll get to that in Romans 10 but the central issue is God. *Without God choosing us we would never choose him* We can either respond to God's sovereignty with rejection and anger or with submission and praise. Incidentally, God does not feel the need to resolve all our questions about election, predestination and His sovereignty. But, He does want us to be humble. He calls us to believe, even when we don't understand.

2. It glorifies God by putting him in his rightful place as the ruler of the universe.

This text states it with almost shocking bluntness.

He shows mercy on whom he wants to show mercy, and judgment on whom he wants to show judgment. *God does exactly what he wants to do.* No one can question him. No one can stand against Him or overrule Him. The only person in the universe who truly has freewill is God. All of his creatures are limited. God is therefore glorified when we proclaim His absolute and unlimited freedom in all things. In Exodus 3:14, God says, ***"I am who I am"*** and as such He has the right to deal with us any way He chooses. We would do well to memorize Psalm 115:3: ***"Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him."***

3. It challenges us to consider the basis of our relationship with God.

This passage teaches us that not everyone is going to heaven.

Isaac is in, Ishmael is out. Jacob is in, Esau is out. Moses is in, Pharaoh is out. Just because you call yourself a Christian doesn't mean you are truly born again. Just because you go to church on Sunday doesn't mean you truly are a child of God. Let's come back to the whiteboard. Which circle are you in?

No one goes to heaven on the basis of their race, their family background, their ethnic affiliation, or their church membership. None of that matters to God. *The only thing that matters is knowing Jesus Christ personally.* Salvation begins when you lay aside your trust in yourself and your background and come humbly like a little child to Jesus. Salvation is not about fair; it's about mercy. If you want fair you'll get hell; if you want mercy you'll gain heaven. What will it be for you? Are you going to trust your merits or God's mercy?

4. It gives us assurance of salvation and eternal security.

The one who saved us will bring His work to completion (Philippians 1:6). Knowing that God chose you for salvation means that He will keep you secure for eternity. If it was all about Him at the beginning He will keep you safe until the end. Referring to this section

of Scripture, John Piper writes: *“Paul doesn’t deal with controversial doctrine in the abstract – as if it would simply be interesting to know – he deals with it because it is needed to help us understand and enjoy God’s faithfulness.”* God’s mercy doesn’t come to us because of what we’ve done and therefore it cannot be lost because of something we do.

5. If we won’t accept God’s mercy we will one day face his justice.

I’m reminded of the story of the judge who announced to the accused man standing before him, *“Sir, you have nothing to fear in this courtroom. We will make sure that you receive justice.”* To which the man replied, *“I don’t want justice. I want mercy.”* The only way any of us will ever go to heaven is through the mercy of God. *But God will not force his mercy on you.* If you persist in refusing God’s offer of forgiveness through Christ, if you insist on going your own way, then at length you will not receive mercy. You will face God’s justice.

It was C.S. Lewis who reminded us that there are only two possibilities in the universe. Either a man says to God, *“Thy will be done,”* or God says to man, *“All right then. Your will be done.”* If you choose to do your will in this life instead of God’s will, then one day you will face God’s justice.

Did you hear the ominous warning on Friday from the National Hurricane Center? In very strong words, officials made this statement: *“Flee now or face certain death.”* We could say it his way: *Put your faith in Jesus now or face certain death.* Have you ever believed on Jesus Christ as your only hope for eternal salvation? Let’s skip ahead a chapter to Romans 10:9: ***“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”***

God’s Word cannot fail because He is faithful and He is fair...and He will never drop you.

Romans 9:30-33 Why People Stumble Over Christ - 9/28/08

Do you know what a caricature is? One definition says that it’s *“a representation, especially pictorial or literary, in which the subject’s distinctive features or peculiarities are deliberately exaggerated to produce a comic or grotesque effect.”*

Merriam-Webster offers a shorter description: *“An exaggeration by means of often ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics.”*

Political figures are often depicted in this way (show John McCain and Barack Obama), movie stars (show Tom Cruise) and there are countless caricatures of Elvis available. I want to suggest this morning that many people today have created a false caricature of Christ. Let me list five that I heard on a podcast by James MacDonald (www.walkintheword.com).

- **Jesus is my buddy.** While it is true that Jesus calls believers his “friends,” He is not just a pal. If we saw Him as He really is, we would fall flat on our faces. When the Apostle John saw Jesus in the first chapter of Revelation, he says: ***“I fell at his feet as though dead”*** (Revelation 1:17).
- **Jesus is my good luck charm.** People who have this image of Jesus think that just because they have Him around their neck or carry Him in their purse that they’ll be protected. Friends, Jesus is not lucky, He is Lord.
- **Jesus is my religious artifact.** Some people believe Jesus lives at church and they go there to kiss a picture or bow before a statue. We saw a lot of this in Mexico.
- **Jesus is my meal ticket.** In this picture, Jesus wants to give me His “favor” and will make me healthy and wealthy. Many people today believe that Jesus is the key that unlocks the door to every longing in the sinful heart. Remember this: Jesus doesn’t work for you; you work for Him.
- **Jesus is my social conscience.** In this caricature of Christ, Jesus is an example for us as we seek to be involved in horizontal goodness. Since Jesus was a nice man and a good teacher, I should be nice to others. Friends, Jesus is an example but He’s so much more.

What we need is a true picture of Jesus, with nothing avoided and nothing exaggerated. We must be careful to not overemphasize one aspect of Christ’s character at the exclusion of the totality of His being.

Can I draw your attention to the first part of Romans 9:30? Paul writes: ***“What then shall we say?”*** This is his common way of saying, *“Here’s what I mean.”* He uses this same phrase in Romans 3:5 and Romans 9:14. Since the verses that follow can either be considered a conclusion to Romans 9 or an introduction to Romans 10, here’s a brief review of where we’ve been the last three weeks (see www.pontiacbible.org for full manuscripts of these messages).

- In Romans 9:1-5, we learned that *evangelism will have little effect if we don’t love the lost.* Paul cried for the unconverted and so should we.
- In Romans 9:6-18, we were reminded that *God’s Word cannot fail because He is faithful and He is fair...and He will never drop you.*
- Then, last week while we focused on how to make sense of predestination in Romans 9:19-29, we uncovered this truth: *God is*

*supremely sovereign **and** we are responsible for our response to Him.*

We need to see Jesus for who He really is. When we do, we will either stumble over Him or stand on Him. Unfortunately, some people today don't stumble over Him because they've shrunk the Savior to a more manageable size.

There are different stumbling blocks for different people. It seems that those who follow religious ritual and rules may have the biggest struggle, while those who know they are sinners often embrace the Savior far easier. I have three stones up here on the stage with a different word on each one. These words summarize our passage for today in Romans 9:30-33. Before we get to them, let's read it together:

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.' As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'

Drop down to the end of verse 32: ***"They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.'"*** The word, ***"stumbled,"*** literally means to strike, slam, or dash against and was used of a traveler bumping into an obstacle that makes him slip or trip. It carries with it the idea of suffering harm, taking offense, and being annoyed or enraged (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament). Most of the New Testament uses of this word describe a figurative or spiritual stumbling. Like stubbing your baby toe on the coffee table in the middle of the night, so is someone who stumbles over the stumbling stone. I'll demonstrate by walking into each of these stones [look surprised, express pain, and finally become enraged]. Let's look now at each of these stumbling stones.

Stumbling Stone #1: SINNER

The first stone that makes many people stumble is the struggle to admit that they are sinners. Look at the second part of verse 30: ***"That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith."*** The word ***"pursue"*** means to run swiftly after something or earnestly seeking a goal. As we learned last week, a Gentile is anyone who is not Jewish. For the most part, as we have seen in the early chapters of Romans, most people are not earnestly seeking a right relationship with God.

Instead of running after righteousness, many are sliding south into sin. Listen to the words found in Romans 1:29-32:

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

These same people, who are a lot like each of us, according to Romans 9:30 have obtained righteousness, even though they weren't pursuing it. One thing they did have figured out was that they were sinners. They knew that their behavior would never qualify them as righteous; the only way for that to happen was ***"by faith."*** Literally this means "out of, or from" faith and is not just a mental assent but a firm conviction and surrender to the truth. They received something they weren't even looking for, much less striving to attain, but they got it because of faith. Don't miss this. Having a right relationship with God is not something you can work for because it comes as a gift. Righteousness is a gift of God's grace, not a reward for hard work. I love Isaiah 65:1:

I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me.

Friend, do you have it figured out that you're a sinner? If not, you'll keep stumbling over this one until you do. If you're settled and you know that you're a sinner, that's a good thing for in Matthew 9:13, Jesus says: ***"For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*** I should warn you however, that sin can also cause us to miss the message because of its potential to hold us in bondage. Listen to the words of 1 Peter 2:8: ***"They stumble because they disobey the message..."*** That hearkens back to Genesis 4:7:

But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.

Stumbling Stone #2: SAVIOR

The Jewish people at that time struggled to admit their sinfulness and as a result didn't see their need for a Savior. Notice the contrast in verse 31: ***"But Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it."*** Even though they pursued the Law, they couldn't reach the Lord behind the Law, because they somehow thought they could attain righteousness on their own. They were grasping but could never reach the goal of righteousness. The word ***"attained"*** means to come suddenly and unexpectedly

upon a goal. Israel was working hard but they couldn't get to where they needed to be.

Galatians 3:10-14 fills in some of the details about why Law-living alone does not make one right before God:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith.' The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, 'The man who does these things will live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

The Jews tried to keep the law scrupulously, they offered gallons upon gallons of animal blood on the altar; they followed the dietary laws and did whatever else they thought they should do. Romans 9:32 gives some more clarity about this:

"Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.'"

Why did they not find what they were looking for? Because righteousness is never a result of work; but comes only by faith. God wants more than just ritualistic rule-keeping; righteousness comes out of a relationship with Him by faith. This idea goes all the way back to Genesis 15:6:

Abraham believed in the Lord and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

They were so privileged that they thought they could reach righteousness on their own. As is true with Gentiles, so it is true for a Jew – the only way to a right relationship with God is ***"by faith"*** in Jesus. That explains why most Jews were so incensed at the Savior. First of all, they didn't want to admit they were sinners and secondly, they thought they had no need of saving. As a result

they stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.'"

That reminds me of 1 Corinthians 1:23:

But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews..."

They were looking for a mighty Messiah who would wipe out the Roman Empire. While looking for a bold lion, they missed the bleeding Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world (see John 1:29).

As a result, most of the Jews recoiled from Jesus because He failed to meet their expectations and they were offended by His exclusive claims. Kind of sounds like the caricatures of Christ that people have today, doesn't it? Many acknowledge that Jesus was a good teacher but they want nothing to do with the fact that He is the only way to the Father. Shortly after Jesus was born, Simeon predicted in Luke 2:34 that Jesus would be a stumbling stone, causing people to be separated into two groups:

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against..."

This happened time and time again as Matthew 13:57 says:

And they took offense at him...

One commentator explained it this way:

The offense of the Cross, at which they stumbled, is not simply the fact that it is a cross, whereas they expected a Messianic throne; the Cross offended them because...it summoned them to begin their religious life, from the very beginning, at the foot of the Crucified, and with the sense upon their hearts of an infinite debt to Him, which no 'works' could every repay.

In Matthew 21, Jesus uses some strong language to communicate that no one who comes in contact with Him can stay the same. Referring to Himself in Mt 21:42, Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected and He is now the chief cornerstone of the building of believers He is making. In Mt 21:43 He tells the Jewish religious leaders that because they have rejected Him, the message will now go to the Gentiles:

Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

That's exactly what we learned last week.

And in Mt 21:44, Jesus declares:

He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

Either we will be humbled and broken so that we believe in Him or we will be hardened and end up being crushed by Him. But no

one can stay the same. We can put it this way: *You will either stumble and fall over Him or become humble and call on Him.*

Stumbling Stone #3:

SIMPLE

Are you stumbling over the fact that you're a sinner? Are you in crisis because you don't want to confess the Savior as your Lord? There's a third thing that people stumble over today. Many stumble because the way of salvation is simple. Check out Ro 9:33:

As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.'

I want to point out a couple things here from the phrase, ***"As it is written..."***

- This is in the perfect tense which emphasizes the lasting and binding authority of what has been written. It still "stands" written.
- The Apostle Paul quotes freely from the Old Testament in his writings. This is a good reminder for us to know the Word so that we can quote it as well.

Actually, Paul is combining parts of two passages from Isaiah 8:14:

A stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, and a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many will stumble over them, then they will fall and be broken. They will even be snared and caught" and Isaiah 28:16: ***"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed."***

Paul combines these two passages to show that Jesus is either a Rock of Refuge or a Stumbling Stone.

Let's go back to Romans 9:33. The little word ***"see"*** in Hebrew narrative means "look!" and is designed to call attention to something. Paul wants every one of us to look to the stone in Zion that causes some to stumble and also to the rock that will trip up those who are filled with pride. That phrase ***"makes them fall"*** was used of any entanglement around the foot. Those who are unwilling to fall on their own will be made to fall from the force of the rock. This same rock is the refuge for those who respond in repentance and faith.

Robert Haldane said:

A free salvation becomes an offense to men on account of their pride – men's desire is to do something...to merit their salvation, at least in part."

The requirement is simple – it's called trust. Once we settle our sinfulness and see Jesus as Savior then we're called to simple trust. I love how Jesus reframed his listeners' desire to "work" for their salvation in John 6:28-29. It's as if He's saying that if they want to work, here's their job:

Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'

This is similar to what we read in Acts 16:30-31 when the Philippian jailer asked this question: ***"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"***

The answer was simple:

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved.

This past Friday I ran into someone who lives in the community and we started talking about the financial crisis gripping our nation. He made an interesting statement. He said something like this: *"It's all so complicated and hard to figure out. I don't know what the salvation is."* I wish I could tell you that I was ready with a response but I missed an opportunity to explain how simple salvation really is. It's not that complicated. And yet people stumble over it all the time. Salvation is simple because Jesus did all the work. It's free because He paid the price for your sins. And it's a gift because all you need to do is receive it. Because we are sinners we can trust Him for our salvation and we can also trust Him with the stresses of our lives.

As I thought about the sermon last week, I realized that there's one more practical and very personal application we can draw from the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Since God is in complete control and has ultimate authority, you and I can trust Him with all the horrible headlines and the uneasy uncertainty that is swirling around us. The end of verse 33 says: ***"And the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame."*** The word ***"trusts"*** is in the present tense, meaning that we can always trust, every day and every moment. The door is still open. And when we do, we will never be put to shame. It's difficult but it's also simple. As a way to get this imprinted in our heads and on our hearts, I'm going to read a number of statements and I'd like you to respond with this

phrase after each one: ***“I will trust Him.”***

- With hurricanes and other weather-related catastrophes... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With our national economy teetering as Wall Street affects Main Street, even when Warren Buffet has referred to this crisis as our “financial Pearl Harbor,” and President Bush has said that “our entire economy is in danger”... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With the threat of an “October surprise” terrorist attack... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With higher gas, food and utility costs... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With our presidential election coming up in less than 40 days... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With the potential for the Pontiac Correctional Center to close... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With the uncertain harvest of corn and beans... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With our own church offerings falling off... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- With whatever you are facing... ***“I will trust Him.”***
- I own the fact that I’m a sinner and I believe that Jesus is my Savior. And now by simple faith I receive Him into my life... ***“I will trust Him.”***

Jesus is either a Rock of Refuge or a Stumbling Stone. Are you standing on the rock or are you stumbling over being a sinner? Are you embracing the Savior and exhibiting simple trust in the One who died in your place? Those who trust in Him will never be put to shame. That means you’ll never be sorry that you gave your life to Jesus. Those who stumble over Him now will be ashamed that they have wasted their lives in the pursuit of possessions and other pleasures when they see Him face to face.

Is Jesus a Rock of Refuge or a Stumbling Stone to you? Will you trust the One who will never let you down or will you be crushed by Him? Don’t be content with a caricature of Christ or of the Christian life when you can have the real thing.

We’re going to close this morning with a song by Michael Card called [Scandalon by Michael Card - YouTube](#). This word literally means an “offense.” Jesus does make us stumble in order to make us humble. And He breaks us in order to bind us together again.

Romans 10:9-10 Highway to Heaven - 4/24/11

Everywhere we turn there are signs but sometimes they are very confusing...

Some send contradictory messages...

And others are too strict or simply too confining for us...

We’re all on a journey; in fact life itself feels like a highway. One popular song puts it like this: *“Every day is a winding road. I get a little bit closer. Every day is a faded sign. I get a little bit closer to feeling fine.”* But many of us feel like we’re further and further from our ultimate destination.

Did you know that this year is the 85th Anniversary of Route 66? There are a lot of cool things being planned in our community to commemorate this milestone. I called Ellie Alexander, Pontiac’s Director of Tourism, to get some attendance figures about the Route 66 Museum. In 2010, 13,000 visitors from 53 countries visited the Museum. People journey here from all around the world. Just last week visitors arrived in Pontiac from 19 different countries and 14 states!

I want to suggest that life is like a highway and that we’re all on a journey. If we hope to make it to heaven we’re going to have to follow the right signs.

I can think of three purposes of signs. They give...

- **Information**
- **Guidance**
- **Warning**

According to the “Manual of Traffic Signs” (yes, there’s really a manual), signs must meet five fundamental requirements. They must...

- **Fulfill a need**
- **Demand attention**
- **Convey a clear, simple meaning**
- **Command respect from travelers**
- **Give adequate time for a proper response**

God has given us some significant signs to meet our needs, to command our attention, he gives us a clear meaning and these are intended to command respect from us. At the end of this message we're going to give you adequate time for a proper response.

1. Slippery Road.

This first sign shows that the road we're traveling is actually very treacherous. The Bible says that we're all sinners... ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*** (Romans 3:23). It's very easy for sin to spin us out of control.

While we might want to do what's right, no one is without sin. If we're not cutting corners, we're veering into other lanes.

The Bible traces sin back to the Garden of Eden where God told Adam and Eve to not eat of the fruit of one particular tree. The serpent deceived Eve who ate the fruit and then offered some to Adam.

It was through that deliberate choice that sin entered the world. Theologians call this event "The Fall." It means that when Adam ate the fruit he fell from a state of innocence into a state of guilt.

What does all this have to do with you and me? In some mysterious way, when Adam sinned, we sinned. Adam was the driver of the bus of humanity and when he drove the bus over the cliff, we went down with him. As a result, we're separated from God. Romans 6:23 tells us that ***"the wages of sin is death."*** That means that the salary we get from our sin is separation from God. We're in a mess of trouble. Deuteronomy 32:35 says, that ***"In due time their foot will slip."***

I can think of two detours that many people take. I've tried them both; perhaps you have as well.

- **We can try to build our own way to God** through a massive construction effort that may last a lifetime. But good works don't work. Religion itself cannot redeem us. Trying to be moral ultimately doesn't matter. Proverbs 14:12: ***"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."*** With the passing of time and the accumulation of guilt and shame, we often just give up.

Another dead end road is when we...

- **Bail on God by going the other way** (walk away from Him). This doesn't work either, does it? We look for love in all the wrong places as we search for significance and meander through life desperate for meaning and purpose. Eventually we'll spin out on the shoulder or crash into a guardrail...or worse.

Where are you today? Are you trying to make a way on your own, or have you gone off the highway to heaven?

If we're honest we have to admit that we're running on empty and some of us are running blind.

Whatever direction you take, it's the wrong way...

2. Jesus is the Only Way.

The next sign reminds us that Jesus is the only highway to heaven and the only roadway to righteousness. Interestingly, the Bible uses the word "sign" to describe the Savior. It's like there are flashing neon lights throughout the Scriptures that we ignore at our own peril. Here are three passages that come to mind...

- Isaiah 7:14. At Christmas we often hear this verse quoted. Listen for the word "sign" in it: ***"The Lord Himself will give you a sign. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel."***
- Luke 2:12. Later the shepherds are given some direction through another sign: ***"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."***
- Luke 2:34-35. Eight days after His birth an older guy named Simeon predicts that not everyone is going to embrace Jesus. Listen again for the word "sign." ***"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many will be revealed..."***

Jesus made a rather bold statement in John 14:6 – ***"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*** *Jesus is the only highway to heaven.*

Romans 5:8: ***"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** Jesus took our place that we might have His peace; He took our sin that we might have His salvation.

By dying on the cross, He died in your place, as your substitute, so that your sins can be forgiven. That's what makes Good Friday "good."

è **At our Good Friday encounters, we took a nail and pounded our names into the cross to remind us that Jesus died for each one of us. This is a sign that He knows your name and that his death paid the price for your sin.**

When Jesus died, a sign was placed on the cross that was understandable in Aramaic, Latin and Greek: **“JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS”** (John 19:19). Some of you will recognize the letters INRI on crosses even today. It’s an acronym in Latin.

The fact that this sign was written in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin is significant. It shows that He was crucified in a place where many peoples and nations met. It was like a sign on the road that people passed by. What He did on the cross, He did for the whole world! Without realizing it, Pilate wrote a “salvation sign.” This sign is still calling out to each one of us today. Do you see it? Will you submit and surrender to Him as your king?

On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the grave, demonstrating His power over death, and thus paving the highway to heaven. Jesus has bridged the gap between a holy God and sinful people. He indeed *is* King.

But my guess is that some of you feel like you’re just running against the wind. Maybe you’ve lost your way because there are just so many different roads to choose from.

Are you living to run or just running to live? It’s time to slow down and look at the signs. Some of us are really into signs. We look for them in our horoscope or in the everyday routines of life. When we look at our world today, we can’t help but wonder what kind of signs God is sending in order to get our attention.

In John’s Gospel, he spells out seven different signs that shout out that the Savior has come to make a highway to heaven. According to John 2:11, the purpose of these signs was **“to reveal His glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.”** Here’s the order – God *reveals* and people *respond*.

A group of griping religious guys go after Jesus in John 2:18 and demand: **“What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”** Jesus, referring to His body that was about to be killed and then raised back to life, said this: **“Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.”**

The **Empty Tomb** is the strongest sign yet that Jesus is the only highway to heaven.

**He is not here!
He is risen!**

And how cool that He rises from the dead in a garden, which should take us back to the first sign up here on the stage – to the first garden where the slippery slope of sin was introduced.

3. The Way is Narrow.

If this Scripture doesn’t make us squirm, I don’t know what will. Matthew 7:13-14: **“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”** Jesus is using a common teaching method to contrast two decisions and two destinations.

The gate you take determines your fate! Where you wind up later depends on which road you take now because *Jesus is the only highway to heaven.*

There’s an action that must be taken – we must actually *enter* through the narrow gate. It’s given in the form of a command which means that we’re to do it now, with a sense of urgency. Don’t just admire the principles of Christianity or try to follow some of its teachings – accept and receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

This means that it’s not automatic; it doesn’t just happen by osmosis because you’re an American or because you’ve gone to church your whole life or because you come to a special service on Easter or Christmas.

The highway to heaven is narrow, meaning that it not only takes effort to find it, but it takes determination to enter through it. Jesus made it narrow without checking with us for our ideas of how wide it should be. Actually, the entrance ramp is Jesus Himself as stated in John 10:9: **“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.”**

While the narrow gate is exclusive, the wide gate is all-inclusive. The word wide means ample and more than usual. The implication is that it is very popular and very easy to enter: **“...and many enter through it.”** We might as well admit that the wide gate seems far more inviting than the narrow one.

Let me point out that those who go through the gate of the Lord Jesus Christ will be in the minority: ***“and only a few find it.”*** God always has His remnant and it's normally a small number. 1 Peter 3:20 reminds us that only a few were saved by entering the ark with Noah: ***“In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved...”***

And those who go through the wide gate will be many. If you're considering following Christ, and you want to be popular and live a life of pleasure, you're standing at the wrong gate. The highway to heaven is narrow, it always has been and it always will be.

4. Our Response: Repent and Receive.

Here's the deal. You can understand everything I've said so far and even agree with it and still be on the highway to Hell. In fact, if you do nothing and just keep traveling through life apart from Christ, that's where the road of life will take you. That's our default setting.

Friend, you can't build your way to God and I sure hope you don't bail on Him. There is a highway to heaven and the only way to get there is on the road marked “Jesus.” Right now you are standing at a crossroads [turn sign to show cross] and the two “Rs” on this sign represent two biblical words.

- **Repent.** This word means to turn from the road you've been traveling and make a u-turn. It's a traveling term that describes going in a different direction. Admit you are a sinner and that you're on a slippery slide. Own the fact that you have blown it. Give up your construction project.
- **Receive.** Will you believe in Him right now? The word “believe” is an action word – it means to *“cling to, to trust in, and rely on.”* John 1:12 takes it a step further by saying that we must not only believe; we must receive: ***“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*** Will you take the “on ramp” and receive Jesus Christ right now?

Romans 10:9-10: ***“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”***

Religion is spelled with two letters: “D-O.” It's a list of things people think they have to *do* in order to be accepted by God – go to church, give money, keep the Ten Commandments, be baptized, and pray every day. The list is endless. It's always Do . . . Do . . . Do. Christianity is spelled with four letters – “D-O-N-E.”

Salvation is not based on what we *do* but upon what Jesus Christ has already done. If you want to get on the highway to heaven, you don't have to *do* anything; you just have trust in what Jesus Christ has already *done* for you. That's the whole difference – *Do* versus *Done*. Either you try to do it yourself and never make it, or you lay down your hard hat, and your hard heart, and believe that Jesus Christ has already *done* it for you. And then you receive what He has done by responding to Him.

If God were to ask, “*Why should I let you into heaven?*” what would your answer be? The only correct answer is that you have jumped on the highway to heaven by repenting of your sins and by receiving Jesus Christ as your Savior, who by his shed blood, paid for all your sins.

The band is going to lead us in a song called, “Glorious Day” right now. This song captures the essence of the story of what the Savior did for us.

Play this great rendition of Glorious Day by Casting Crowns

[Glorious Day \(Living He loved me\)](#)

Living, He loved me
Dying, He saved me
Buried, He carried my sins far away
Rising, He justified freely forever
One day He's coming
Oh glorious day, oh glorious day

The whole aim of our service today is to give you an opportunity to connect with Christ. During this past week, PBC people signed up for **245** 10-minute time slots to pray for you. You've been prayed for and I'm going to ask them to pray like mad right now for you as well. This is a sacred moment for we believe that right now many of you will have your lives radically redirected by the resurrected Christ!

I'd like to lead you in a prayer. If you're ready to repent and receive what Jesus accomplished on the Cross and get on the highway to heaven, I'd like you to pray a prayer along with me silently. Forget about anyone else right now. It's time to get on the right road! Don't promise to try and do better or just work harder and please don't wait for another time. This is the time right now.

"God, I realize that I've been on the wrong road and that I'm a sinner. I've not been traveling the highway to heaven but I want to change that right now. I confess that I'm a sinner and I want to make a u-turn and get on the right road. I believe that Jesus died in my place and rose from the dead and I now repent and receive Him as my Savior and Lord for He is the only highway to heaven. I offer you my life. Enable me to stay on the narrow road as I live my life for you."

In order to seal this moment, I'm going to give you the opportunity to stand if you have made a decision to get on the highway to heaven. This may feel awkward or even embarrassing but I assure you that you will never forget this moment. Here's how we're going to do it. I'm going to count to three and when I say, "three," I'd like you to stand if you have responded to the revelation of the Savior. Ready? One. Two. Three. Go ahead and stand.

If you made a decision to change direction this morning, we have a special gift for you. I'd like you to stop by our "Next Steps" table in the back. And now I'd like everyone to stand and as you do, let's join the party in heaven by clapping our hands in recognition that Jesus is the only highway to heaven.

Growth Signs

The Bible refers to believers as those who belong to the way (Acts 9:2). Those who know Jesus as the Way follow His way. That means that we must stay on the right road.

Proverbs 15:19 says, ***"The way of the sluggard is blocked by thorns but the path of the upright is a highway."***

And Proverbs 16:17 says, ***"The highway of the upright avoids evil; he who guards his way guards his life."***

Let me make a two-point application that relates to growing as a believer. These signs are good for those of you who just decided to get on the highway to heaven and they're also applicable for those of us who might have hit some pothole problems. Or maybe you're in the ditch today, or out of gas, or you've just lost direction. Let's face it; we're all under construction...

Here's how Christ does his construction work in our lives. If you need help with direction or with making decisions, follow these two signs...

1. Yield to Christ daily.

Romans 12:1: ***"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."***

2. Read the 66 Books of the Bible daily. Get your kicks on God's 66!

Psalms 119:9: ***"How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word."***

Romans 11:11-24 Holding on to Hope - 11/2/08

Certain names will always be associated with the Chicago Bears: Papa Bear Halas, Gale Sayers, Mike Ditka, Jim McMahon, and Walter Payton. And perhaps the greatest middle linebacker ever to play the game was Mike Singletary. For 12 years he led the Chicago defense, prowling from sideline to sideline, calling the defensive signals, barking out orders, and then there were those incredible piercing eyes that could look right through you. "Samurai Singletary" would lean forward, look straight ahead, and then focus his eyes on the quarterback. After his retirement he was voted into the NFL Hall of Fame. No one doubts (not even a Green Bay Packers fan like me!) that he belongs there. He is what a middle linebacker should be.

Speaking of "Packer persecution," when I came into my office on Thursday, I found this note under my door: *"Dear Pastor Brian, you would not believe what happened! A huge group of Bears broke into the church and saw your Packers cup – they couldn't stand the sight of it so they trampled it to the ground. We tried to stop them but it was no use... Okay so that's not exactly what happened. Actually [we] were messing around and it got knocked off a counter and broke into a bunch of pieces... I am so sorry! If you could find it in your Packer-loving heart to forgive us that would be amazing..."* I'm leaving the names off but the two cup culprits are seniors in our high school ministry.

Anyway, where was I? For a number of years Singletary served as a motivational speaker, traveling the country inspiring others to rise to new levels of excellence. But he always dreamed of becoming a coach. He eventually became linebackers coach and assistant head coach of the San Francisco 49ers, a once-proud franchise that has fallen on hard times. It's hard to remember the days of Joe Montana, Bill Walsh, Ronnie Lott and Jerry Rice. Having won five Super Bowls, the 49ers today are a far cry from those

championship teams.

They are, in fact, one of the worst teams in the NFL. That's why two weeks ago the 49ers fired their head coach Mike Nolan and named Mike Singletary as the interim head coach. Some people thought it was a big promotion because Singletary had never been a coordinator, much less a head coach. But he proved his mettle in last Sunday's game against the Seattle Seahawks.

In his first head coaching game, he benched turnover prone quarterback J.T. O'Sullivan in the second quarter and then he took exception to Vernon Davis' attitude and pulled him out of the game and sent him to the locker room in the fourth quarter. In a post-game conference, Singletary explained: *"I told him that he would do a better job for us right now taking a shower and coming back and watching the game than going out on the field...simple as that."* Singletary called Davis' actions "uncoachable" and said that he would rather play with a 10-man squad than have to deal with an apathetic 11-man squad (www.espn.com).

Sending a player to the showers in the 4th quarter is a pretty gutsy move. Let's face it; even established coaches rarely do something like that. Maybe Mike Singletary figures he's got nothing to lose. Perhaps he knows that he needed to do something to shake up and wake up his team. But if you want to win, you'd better have the right guys out on the field. And you might as well send the rest of the team to the showers.

It may surprise you to know that God feels the same way. Sometimes he has to send people to the showers in order to get their attention. It's not enjoyable or easy to do, and it's not fun at all if you're the one who's been pulled off the field. But God always knows what he's doing. He never pulls us off the field without a good reason.

In a similar way, God sent Israel to the locker room not only because of their attitudes, but because of their actions. He then put a new team on the field, called the Gentiles. But He's not done with Israel either. By watching salvation from the sidelines, the hope is that Israel will see its error and want to get back in the game.

Last week we learned that failure is not final because we don't see all that God is doing, grace is a gift not a reward and there are consequences to rejecting Christ. The nation of Israel for the most part has rejected Christ but this failure is not final for them. If last week the focus was on the grace of God, today we're going to learn about the grafting of God. Next week we'll understand more about the guarantee of God and then we'll finish up Romans 11 two weeks from today as we celebrate the glory of God.

Results of Rejection

Paul picks up the question he raised in Romans 11:1 in verse 11: ***"Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?"*** We established last week that there's a remnant of true believers but for the most part, Jewish people have not put their faith in Jesus. Here he's speaking of the ethnic Israelites and wondering if they have fallen so far that there is no hope of them getting back in the game. For the tenth and last time in Romans Paul gives this very strong answer: ***"Not at all!"*** Israel has not lost their privileged position before God forever – the promises of national blessing are still valid. His rejection is not permanent.

This is just a sidebar but I'd like to make an important point. Our understanding of God's plan for Israel affects our eschatology, which is the doctrine of what will happen in the end-times. We believe that God will fulfill His promises to Israel. This also affects our theology – if God is through with Israel then what happens to all the promises? How can we trust God's faithfulness unless we believe He will keep His word?

Paul then gives four results related to their present rejection of Jesus.

1. Salvation has now come to the Gentiles.

We see this in the next phrase in verse 11: ***"Salvation has come to the Gentiles..."*** It's important to realize that while God started his plan of salvation with the Jewish people, it was always intended to spread to the Gentiles. We see this way back in Genesis 12:3 when God spoke to Abraham: ***"...And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*** Isaiah 49:6 tells us that God's people were to proclaim God's message to all peoples: ***"I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."***

Because Israel erred by rejecting Jesus, God turned to the Gentiles. We see this clearly in the New Testament in a number of passages. Let's turn to the gospels first. In Matthew 8:11-12 Jesus spoke these words to a people who felt they were so privileged that God would never reject them,

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, [Gentiles] and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom [Jews] will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 21:43:

Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

The missionaries Paul and Barnabas focused on the Jews first but when they rejected the message they said in Acts 13:46:

We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.”

Later, in Acts 18:6 this pattern is followed again:

But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’”

In one of the last verses in the Book of Acts, Paul declares to those Jews who refused to listen:

Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”(Acts 28:28)

God used Israel’s rejection to bring riches to the Gentiles and this was part of His plan all along. In Romans 11:12 and Romans 11:15 we see that if God used their failures to get the gospel to the Gentiles, He will use their faithfulness even more:

How much greater riches will their fullness bring! For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”

When a Jew becomes a believer in Jesus he or she becomes a “completed Jew.” If you’ve ever met a “messianic Jew,” they are filled with passion for evangelism and are a power to be reckoned with.

C. S. Lewis puts it like this:

In a sense, the converted Jew is the only normal human being in the world. Everyone else is, from one point of view, a special case dealt with under emergency conditions.”

We got in, as it were through the back door, because Israel erred and was on the bench. But the ones who really belong are the Jews who believe in Jesus.

2. This should make the Jews jealous.

Check out the last phrase in Ro 11:11: “***...To make Israel envious.***” When the Jews looked at how the Gentiles were living the Jesus-life, it should have moved them to jealousy. This is stated even more clearly in Ro 11:13-14:

“I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.”

As we learned in the opening verses of Romans 9, Paul is broken up by the unbelief of the Israelites and will do anything possible to bring salvation to them.

Have you ever been jealous of what someone has? When you see a Christ-follower really living for Christ, isn’t it motivational? It’s convicting but hopefully also compelling. I saw what my roommate Bruce had and I wanted it. That’s because He was living it.

3. This should make Gentiles humble. Using two metaphors, Paul reminds us of the importance of not boasting or being arrogant (Ro 11:18 and Ro 11:20). Specifically, we are not to boast arrogantly over our privileges or possessions as believers.

- **Piece of dough.** Look at verse 16: “***If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy...***” A Jewish person would understand this very well. Paul is referring to the offerings and sacrifices in the tabernacle and the practice of setting aside the first of one’s increase to God. Numbers 15:20-21 sheds light on this: “***Present a cake from the first of your ground meal and present it as an offering from the threshing floor. Throughout the generations to come you are to give this offering to the Lord from the first of your ground meal.***”

For the firstfruits, a pile of dough was made up and it would be presented to God. This first portion of the harvest was regarded both as an installment and as a pledge that the whole harvest belonged to God.

This is carried on today when we give our tithes and offerings to the Lord – we’re giving a portion in acknowledgment that it all belongs to Him. Proverbs 3:9: “***Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.***”

Paul is arguing that if this chunk of dough was accepted as holy before God, the rest of the harvest would be as well. Abraham is the

firstfruit and was accepted -- therefore his descendents will be too. Here's the point: *What is considered first contributes its character to what is related to it.*

- **Grafted branches.** I called Chad Jones a week ago and asked him for some help understanding the whole grafting deal. He helped a ton. Normally, a really good branch was grafted into a stump that wasn't so good; often it was a branch from a cultivated olive tree that was grafted into a wild tree. Olive trees were very important to the economy of the Israelites. They can live for hundreds of years and it was common for some branches to stop producing fruit. When this would happen, branches from younger trees would be grafted in. Sometimes shoots from a wild olive tree would be grafted into a domestic olive tree that was bearing little fruit in an attempt to strengthen or save the life of the tree (from IVP Bible Background Commentary).

But let me point out that this second illustration that Paul uses, according to verse 24, is ***“contrary to nature.”*** In this metaphor, God flips it in Ro 11:17: ***“If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root.”***

What God has done here is unnatural. Rather than grafting good branches into a worthless stock, He has grafted worthless branches into a good stock. In this picture, the branches that have been broken off are ethnic Jews who are not believers in Jesus and the wild olive shoots are the Gentiles who have been grafted in to God's goodness. Notice that only “some” are broken off – the remnant of true believers is not severed. The olive root represents the promises and covenants given to Abraham.

Some have objected to the possibility of grafting a wild olive branch onto a cultivated olive tree. But it is done on occasion and as a result two things happen. First, the wild branch begins to produce good olives. And second, the old tree is newly invigorated. The Israelites would have understood this illustration on a deeper level because time and again in the Old Testament they themselves were referred to as an olive tree. Here's just one example from Jeremiah 11:16. Note the connection to Romans 11 and this was written about 600 years earlier: ***“The Lord called you a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form. But with the roar of a mighty storm he will set it on fire, and its branches will be broken.”***

In John 4:22 Jesus made a strong statement: ***“For salvation is from the Jews.”*** Because Gentiles have been grafted in, verse 18 calls us to not boast over our position. The word “boast” means to look down upon or despise. We are supported by the root; the root can survive without us but the branches are absolutely dependent upon the root. Remember that he is not speaking of individual believers because we can never be separated from God (Romans 8:35-39), but to the whole community.

Ro 11:20 admonishes us to not be arrogant and Ro 11:21-22 tell us why: ***“For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.”*** Do you know how you come to God determines what you think of Him? If you come with humility and brokenness, you will find Him to be kind and loving, open-armed and ready to help you. But if you come to Him with a complaining spirit, justifying your actions and attitudes, you will find God to be stern and as merciless as fire.

The same God who broke off the unbelieving Jews can punish proud churches today. While an individual cannot lose their salvation I believe a church can lose its effectiveness and outreach. All you need to do is read about the 7 churches in Revelation to see what happens when holiness is replaced with haughtiness. Don't lose sight of the fact that every single one of these churches eventually ceased to exist.

4. Hold on to hope for the Jewish people.

God is not done yet. He is not done with the Jew...or with you. We see this in Ro 11:23-24: ***“And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!”***

This passage will lead us right into the passage for next week. God is not finished yet. It strikes me that whatever you're struggling with today, it's important to hold onto hope. With the prison situation, hold onto hope. With the economy, hold onto hope. With your family situation, hold onto hope. With that fractured friendship, hold onto hope. With that person far from Christ, hold onto hope. With that Jewish person you know who doesn't yet believe in Jesus, hold onto hope.

Application

Someone recently asked me about Pontiac Bible Church. I told him that we preach and teach the Bible and seek to apply it to our lives. We're passionate about connecting people to Jesus and we're committed to equipping people so that they can be growing and faithful followers. As a way to take this sermon from the head to the feet, from the talk to the walk, here are some application points.

1. Avoid anti-Semitism. There is no place for a Christian to tell jokes about Jewish people or to participate in any kind of mistreatment of them. When you hear someone criticizing them, speak on their behalf. Just last week at Parkway West Middle School in Chesterfield, Missouri, four students face punishment for allegedly hitting Jewish classmates during what they called, "Hit a Jew Day." District spokesman Paul Tandy said, *"There is a mix of sadness and outrage. The concern is that a lot of kids knew about it and they didn't take action or say anything."* I don't know how to explain the intense hatred that many people have for the Jews, from Hitler's holocaust down to what's happening today. But I do know that we as believers owe our heritage to them and are called to love them. As Gentiles we should seek to understand the Jewish context of Christianity in order to better understand Scripture and our own salvation. If not for Judaism, there would be no Christianity. Without understanding the Old Testament, the New Testament won't make much sense.

2. Be thankful that salvation was extended to you.

We of all people should be filled with thankful hearts for all God has done for us. We're going to give you an opportunity to share what you're thankful for during the services on Sunday, November 23rd. This is the Sunday right before Thanksgiving. In order to allow families to enjoy their time together we will not have a Thanksgiving Eve service but will be giving you some information that will help you share your thanks as a family.

3. Believe and receive so you can be saved.

Paul's passion as stated in Ro 11:14 is to ***"save some of them."*** If you're not sure or you know you're not, it's time to believe and receive so that you can be saved. John 1:11-12 states that Jesus came to the Jews first but then He made the offer to all: ***"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."***

4. Live in such a way that those who don't know Jesus will be jealous when they watch your life.

Let me phrase this in a question: *Does how you live make others jealous for Jesus?* Our lives ought to create a genuine thirst in others. Ray Stedman writes: *"Christians ought to be so alive, so vital in our Christianity, so excited and so full of joy and love toward one another that every Jew we contact will say to himself, 'How come they have it and we don't?'"* Let's face it – for the most part Christians as a whole have not lived in a manner in which non-Christians and especially Jews would envy, mainly because we are not always the best examples for Christ.

5. Get back in the game.

Have you been on the sidelines just watching? Some of you burned pretty bright a few years ago but now you're spiritually stalled. God is not through with the Jew...and He's not through with you!

6. Trust in God's sometimes roundabout purposes.

God's plan has always been to extend salvation to the Gentiles but he did it by sending the Israelites to the bench. Sometimes things don't make much sense to us but it's in those times that we need to trust. Claim the truth of Genesis 50:20: ***"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."***

Who Will You Vote For?

It goes without saying that we are a country, and even a county, in crisis. With what many are calling the most important election in our lifetime coming up on Tuesday, I'm going to go out on a limb and endorse someone for president. I urge you to participate as part of your civic and sacred duty. Chuck Colson writes: *"Voting is required of us as good citizens and as God's agents for appointing leaders."* Each candidate wants your vote and has made promises that will be almost impossible to keep.

It's time for us to take a united stand and put our hope in one candidate. As a preacher I avoid politics in the pulpit but this year I'm going to tell you who to vote for. Now that I have your attention...may I urge you to vote for Jesus? Actually, He doesn't just want your vote; He wants your life.

The candidates talk about health care; He is the compassionate healer. They formulate financial bailouts; He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Consumer confidence is at an all-time low; He promises to never leave you or forsake you. They suggest military strategy; He is the Prince of Peace. They make promises to the poor; Jesus is the king of justice. They discuss details of foreign policy; He is worshipped in every tongue and tribe and race.

His name is Jesus and He has approved this message (thanks to Pastor Dave Stone for this idea).

Friends, it's time for us to trust Jesus and hold onto the hope that only He can provide. That means that we will hope even when the

economy is bad. We will trust Him with the election and with the situation with the prison. A group of pastors from the community met here at PBC on Thursday for a roundtable discussion with a reporter from the Daily Leader. Of the many things we talked about, one thought came to the surface. Only in Jesus is our hope and now that God has our attention, good things can and will happen.

As we prepare for communion, let's watch and listen to a prayer by Max Lucado from earlier this month entitled, "You Have Our Attention, Lord" (www.godtube.com).

Our friends lost their house

The co-worker lost her job

The couple next door lost their retirement

It seems that everyone is losing their footing

This scares us. This bailout with billions.

These rumblings of depression.

These headlines: ominous, thunderous-

"Going Broke!" "Going Down!" "Going Under!" "What Next?"

What is next?

We're listening. And we're admitting: You were right.

You told us this would happen.

You shot straight about loving stuff and worshipping money.

Greed will break your heart, you warned.

Money will love you and leave you.

Don't put your hope in riches that are so uncertain.

You were right. Money is a fickle lover and we just got dumped.

We were wrong to spend what we didn't have,

Wrong to neglect prayer and ignore the poor,

Wrong to think we ever earned a dime. We didn't. You gave it.

And now, tell us Father, are you taking it?

We're listening. And we're praying.

Could you make something good out of this mess?

Of course you can. You always have.

You led slaves out of slavery,

Built temples out of ruins,

Turned stormy waves into a glassy pond and water into sweet wine.

This disorder awaits your order.

So do we.

Romans 11:33-36 Living for the Glory of God - 11/16/08

A generation ago J.B. Phillips wrote a book with this title: *Your God Is Too Small*. This captures the struggle many of us have because our God is much smaller than the God of the Bible. This morning one of my goals is to help each of us grow in our grasp of how great God really is because it's so easy to fall into an inadequate view of the Almighty.

A week ago I listened to a podcast interview with Jim Nicodem, pastor of Christ Community Church in St. Charles. He's written a new book called, *Prayer Coach*. One of the suggestions he made to help us magnify our understanding of God is to go through the alphabet each day, thinking of a different attribute or characteristic of God for each letter. I've been doing this for the last week and it has super-sized my view of God while down-sizing myself, which is a good thing. At our joint elder/deacon meeting this past Tuesday we opened our time with this exercise and I'd like to try it again this morning. This will get us in good practice for next Sunday's services as we will give you opportunity to express your thankfulness to God publicly. Our title next week is "Thanks-living."

I've put the letters of the alphabet up here on the whiteboard. Just shout out whatever attribute, characteristic or name of God that comes to your mind. I'll pick one that I hear and write it down so we can all see it.

[For those reading this sermon, I've included an example of how to do this. This is what I came up with one morning this week].

- A - Almighty
- B - Beautiful
- C - Compassionate
- D - Designer
- E - Everlasting
- F - Faithful
- G - Great
- H - Holy
- I - Indescribable
- J - Jehovah Shalom
- K - Kind
- L - Living
- M - Magnificent
- N - No equal
- O - Omnipotent
- P - Personal
- Q - Quiet
- R - Resplendent
- S - Savior
- T - Total
- U - Universe maker
- V - Victor
- W - Worthy
- X - Extravagant (I cheated on this one)
- Y - Yahweh
- Z - Zealous

Let's savor the Scripture this morning from Romans 11:33-36: ***"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."***

One of the best ways to study a passage of Scripture is to read it several times and then meditate on it. After reading and meditating, work at memorizing some of it so it gets in your head and down into your heart. I like to then make observations about what I've read. This is important to do before rushing into application. The best order for studying the Bible is this: Observation, Interpretation and then Application. Or to say it another way:

- What Do I See?
- What Does It Say?
- What Can I Seize?

Observation What Do I See?

Here are some observations that I see.

- The passage begins with the word, ***"Oh..."*** This is an emotional and explosive expression. Something about what Paul has just written and what he is about to say causes a spontaneous emotional outburst.
- These four verses contain 11 references to ***"God," "Lord," "His" or "Him."***
- There are two exclamation marks in verse 33: ***"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!"*** and one at the end of verse 36: ***"To him be the glory forever!"***
- In Ro 11:34-35, there are three question marks: ***"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"***
- These three questions are rhetorical in nature with the answer of *no one* expected.
- These questions are actually Old Testament quotes from Isaiah 40:13 and Job 41:11.
- The word ***"Amen"*** at the end of this passage expresses agreement or approval.
- The placement of this passage comes at the end of a long section of orthodoxy (correct thoughts) in Romans 9-11 and serves as a bridge to Romans 12-16 that focuses on orthopraxy (correct actions). The inseparable nexus between position and practice is praise.
- These four verses have been called a "doxology," or an expression of praise to God.

Interpretation What Does it Say?

After studying this passage, three simple words jumped out at me that will help us understand what God is saying –*Wow, Wonder and Worship*.

1. **Wow!** Let's look more carefully at verse 33: ***"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"*** Paul seems to be struggling to find the right words to describe the depths of God's riches. The word ***"depth"*** describes an enormous distance below a surface. Figuratively it speaks of God's inexhaustible profundity. God is so deep that we can only go down a few feet and peer into eternity.

- **God understands everything.**

Psalm 92:5: ***"How great are your works, O Lord, how profound[deep] your thoughts!"*** The deepest part of all the oceans in the world is believed to be over 36,000 feet, which is about 7 miles! Psalm 36:6 compares God's justice to the ***"great deep."*** To contemplate the depth of God's riches should lead us to say, "Wow!" Paul knew that we would need some help to understand even a little of this so he prays in Ephesians 3:17-18: ***"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."***

One Southern Gospel song (that's for you, Ken) goes like this: *"Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God?"* God knows everything and He is totally wise as well. I like how Arthur Pink describes this: *"God is omniscient. He knows everything: everything possible, everything actual, all events, all creatures, of the past, the present and the future."* God's wisdom refers to the skill with which God weaves His ways and His will into that which gives Him the most glory. The Biblical Illustrator explains the difference between divine knowledge and wisdom: *"He foreknew these things from the beginning, and having foreknown them, He arranged them wisely."*

- **We can't understand everything.**

His judgments are often difficult for us to figure out because we are finite. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it like this: *"Its way over our heads. We'll never figure it out."* Job said it this way in Job 5:9: **"He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted."** We can know God in some measure because He has revealed Himself but we will never fathom everything about the Almighty. I love Job 26:14: **"And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?"** We need to be careful when we demand to understand everything that is happening to us.

- **God's ways are sometimes hard to figure out.**

We can't understand everything and **"his paths are beyond tracing out!"** Did you hear the story this week about how Google is now able to track flu trends in our country? Apparently they are able to analyze aggregated search data to estimate flu activity up to two weeks faster than traditional flu surveillance systems from the CDC. What Paul is saying is that God doesn't always leave footprints for us to follow. God can't always be traced. Check out Job 11:7-9. Even though Zophar was wrong about Job, he was right about his theology: **"Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens — what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave-- what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea."**

It's important for us to come to the point of realizing that we can't figure God out completely and that He delights to astonish us by the wonder of His ways. I like how someone phrased it: *God may conceal the purpose of His ways, but His ways are not without purpose.*

Our response to the depth of God should cause us to say, "Wow!" Let me read this verse again and you respond by saying, "Wow!"

2. Wonder. The next two verses (34-35) should cause wonder to rise up in us as we contemplate three questions.

- **"Who has known the mind of the Lord?"**

The obvious answer to this question is "no one." We can know only what He has chosen to reveal in His word. Deuteronomy 29:29 says that there are some things we will never know: **"The secret things belong to the Lord our God..."** Isaiah 55:9 puts us in our place: **"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."** That reminds me of the ill-prepared college student who was struggling through his final exam in economics. He happened to be taking the test right before Christmas and in desperation, he scrawled these words across the bottom of his paper: *"Only God knows the answers to these questions! Merry Christmas!"* When he got the paper back, the teacher included this note: *"God gets a 100. You get a zero. Happy New Year!"*

- **"Or who has been his counselor?"**

No one. The word **"counselor"** refers to one who gives information about a situation and/or recommends a course of action. Have you ever thought that if you were God you would do things differently? Do you wish that the Lord would consult with you? I like the way Peterson puts it: *"Is there anyone smart enough to tell him what to do?"* Our presidents have a lot of advisors around them to help them make good decisions but God consults no one and needs no one. Job 15:8: **"Do you listen in on God's council?"**

We need to pause here and ponder this because many of us presume to offer God counsel. Have you ever told God, *"I don't like the way you're running the world or the way things are happening in my life? I think you should do it like this..."* The world is filled with God advisers.

- **"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"**

Answer: No one. Sometimes we get ourselves in a bad spot when we think that God somehow owes us something. Elihu, one of Job's supposed friends, was also wrong in his assessment of Job but right in his understanding of God in Job 41:11, which is where this quote in Romans comes from: **"Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me."** No one has ever made God obligated to him. We can't give to God anything that is not already His. Actually, He doesn't owe us, we owe Him. Ray Pritchard writes: *"No one can say, 'I've earned your favor,' because this side of hell is mercy, and everything this side of heaven is grace."* Friends, if there's one summary statement of the Book of Romans here it is: *God saves those He is under no obligation to save."*

What gift of ours would ever put God in a position where He had to repay us? There is nothing we could give to God that He doesn't already own or have in abundance. I love what David said in response to the money He gave to God in 1 Chronicles 29:14: **"But**

who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand."

Earlier this week I called Larry Johnson because I heard that some more cancer has shown up in his brain. After talking with him for awhile I prayed for him, asking God to heal him and to take away any anxiety or worry from Him. When I finished praying, Larry said something I will never forget (I have permission to share this): *"Pastor Brian, I don't worry because either way I can't lose. I've even thanked him for this cancer because the Lord doesn't make mistakes. I'm amazed at how he works – whatever He does; I know it will be right. No doubt about it. I'm just so glad I know the Savior. Anybody who's living for the Lord has got to think this way."* One thing I'm learning from Larry is that instead of always asking 'why' when something bad happens, we should move from wonder to worship.

3. Worship. After describing all of this, it's as if Paul can't help but praise God in a way that summarizes it all: ***"For from Him and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen."***

- **He is the source of all things.**

Everything flows from God: ***"For from Him..."*** He is the beginning of all things. He is the Alpha (the first letter of the Greek alphabet – point to white board). I love reading A.W. Tozer. Check this out: *"An elementary but correct way to think of God is as the One Who contains all, Who gives all that is given, but Who Himself can receive nothing that He has not first given"* (The Knowledge of the Holy). Abraham Kuyper writes: *"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"*

- **He is the sustainer of all things.**

He keeps everything in balance: ***"...and through Him..."*** He is totally involved in everything and nothing falls outside His plans and purposes. Proverbs 16:4: ***"The Lord works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster."*** Therefore, let's praise Him for His power over all predicaments, problems and people. I love what Tony Evans says: *"Everything is either caused by God or allowed by God, and there is no third category."*

- **He is the supreme purpose of all things.**

Nothing is excluded: ***"...and to Him are all things."*** He is the goal of all things, not only the Alpha, but He is the Omega (the last letter of the Greek alphabet – point to whiteboard). He's the beginning and the end. Hebrews 12:2: ***"Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in..."***

Everything comes from Him, everything continues by Him and everything finds its ultimate purpose in Him. That's really the first law of the Christian faith: *He's God and we're not.* Many of us get this turned around. When you do, remember this: *It's not about you.*

Application

What Can I Seize?

1. When faced with a decision or when evaluating a behavior, ask yourself this question: "Can I do this for the glory of God?"

Every prayer we pray, every thought we think, every action we take, every attitude we express, every word that we say should have this statement stamped on it: *To Him be the glory forever!* Keeping the supremacy of God central should be the single desire of every Christian. 1 Corinthians 10:31: ***"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."*** I love John Piper's statement: *"God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."* Are you satisfied in Him today?

2. The greater our view of God the greater strength we'll have to face the trials of life.

The bigness of God should put our problems in perspective. Instead of accusing God; adore Him. Trust His mercy in the midst of the mystery and don't demand to have complete understanding of all that is happening to you.

3. This song of praise is in the context of the salvation story.

Have you received Christ yet? John Piper says that the story of God is all about the glory of God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question, *"What is the chief end of man?"* Here's the answer: *"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."* I love how Dean Ridder is teaching the students at Pontiac Christian about the glory of God. Using the Child's Catechism, he asks them this question: *"Who made you?"* To which they answer: *"God."* *"What else did God make?"* Answer: *"He made everything."* *"Why did God make you and everything else?"* Answer: *"For His own glory."*

Our position in Christ should lead to praise which expresses itself in proper practice. The study of theology must always lead to an

explosive praise of doxology, where we say, *Wow!* That then leads us to *wonder*, which will lead us to a lifestyle of *worship*. If we want to figure out how best to respond to God, how to put our position into practice, we must start with praise. Let's look at the last phrase of verse 36: ***"To Him be the glory forever! Amen."*** We exist to make God look glorious! We want to give him the glory right now as our praise team comes back up to lead us.