

The Immensity and Freedom of God's Mercy

I. God's sovereignty over history, time and destiny - predestination

A. The eternal security of God's call

"Those God predestined He also called, and those whom He called, He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified...neither death, nor life...nor anything else in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."(Rom 8:29,30,39)

B. God's call is effectual

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." John 10:26-30

C. Initiated by God

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he choose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him." (Eph 1:4)

II. The tragedy of Jewish unbelief

"God called them and came to them but most Jews have rejected Christ at the present time. So maybe God's calling and purpose can be rejected! If God promised that Israel would be His people, yet the majority did not believe in Christ, does that mean God's promise, power or mercy is failing?" (Keller, 57)

A. The beneficiaries of unique privilege

1. Adopted as sons

God said Israel is *"My firstborn son"* and *"I am Israel's father"* (Ex 4:22, Jer. 31:9) They were prepared to receive Jesus' teaching that our relationship with God is so secure and intimate that we can refer to God as our Abba.

2. Experienced God's Divine glory

The Lord was present with them in the visible glory cloud manifested in the Exodus, and later in the tabernacle and temple where He dwelt in their midst. His presence was fully realized in Jesus *–The word became flesh and dwelt among us, we have seen His glory."* (John 1:14)

3. Given the Covenants

Beginning with Abraham, God initiated a relationship with His people where He promises *"I will be your God and you shall be My People."* This was elaborated in the covenant stipulations and promises to bless them throughout the OT- ultimately sending the Savior who came to fulfill it.

4. Received the Law

God gave the Ten Commandments and the rest of His glorious law by revelation to Israel (Deut. 4:8). *“Paul told us in Romans 2 that if we truly understand the law, we will see that we cannot merit salvation and will look to God for a provision.”* (Keller, 59)

5. The provision of temple worship

The prescribed regulations for the priesthood and blood sacrifices showed how unholy people could approach a Holy God. It pointed forward to the Messiah, the innocent substitute, whose blood atones for our sin. Jesus, our priest and sacrifice, gives us access to God.

6. Given the promises

This refers, in particular, to the promises and prophecies about the coming Messiah. (Gen 3:15, Psalms 16, 22, Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7, Micah 5:2.)

7. The patriarchs

This includes not only the initial patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but all those appointed by God to speak to His people, including the prophets and great leaders (Joseph, Moses, Joshua Samuel and David.)

8. The human ancestry of Christ is traced through them

“By becoming a Jew, God was giving the Jews a great honor and making it ‘easier’ for them to relate to the son of God than any one else.” (Keller, 60)

C. Advantages alone do not save – but God’s not finished!

“One would think that Israel, favored with these eight blessings, prepared and educated for centuries for the arrival of her Messiah would recognize and welcome Him when He came. How then can one reconcile Israel’s privileges with her prejudices?” (Stott)

Their story is not over - as time and circumstances are showing. Jewish people are coming to Christ now in unprecedented numbers.

III. Did God’s promises fail?

“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.”(v. 6)

A. Promises were given to ‘true’ Israel

*“God has kept His promise, which was addressed, however, not to **all** Israel but to **true** spiritual Israel whom He had called according to His own ‘purpose in election.’”*(Stott, 263)

1. To Isaac, not Ishmael

Both sons were physical descendants of Abraham, but God ordained, *“through Isaac your descendants will be named.”* (v.7) Isaac was the ‘child of the promise’ who would inherit the blessing and from whose descendants the promised savior would come.

2. To Jacob, not Esau

Before they were born and *“had done nothing either good or bad ...the older will serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”* (vv. 11,12)

The word 'hated' is best understood as a Hebrew idiom - making a point of contrast or preference. *"Jesus Himself gives us an interpretive clue, since he told us that we cannot be His disciples unless we 'hate our family.'"* (Stott, 267) This doesn't refer to malice or ill will, but means that our devotion to Jesus must be a higher priority than our devotion to family.

3. It's amazing that God saved either

God loved Jacob for one reason – grace. Jacob didn't deserve God's love any more than Esau did. They were equally rotten. Jacob was a liar, and cheated Esau out of his birthright. Esau was governed by his appetites, was worldly, and had no interest in his spiritual heritage.

4. Why?

Why has God dealt with Jacob and Esau differently? Paul clearly explains that it is *"in order that God's purpose in election might continue, not because of works but because of Him who calls."* (v. 11) *"God's choice does not originate in them or in any works they may have done, but in the mind and will of God."* (Stott, 267)

5. A free gift to be received with humility

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that on one may boast." (Eph 2:8-10)

"Without 'election' you compromise the central teaching of the Bible that we are saved by grace alone, not by our works. If the difference between the unbeliever and the believer is ultimately in us (a greater humility, a greater openness, etc.), then we are the real authors of our salvation." (Keller, 62)

IV. Is God unfair?

"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'"(v. 17)

A. The wrong question!

1. It's not about fairness. It's about mercy

"The question itself is misconceived, because the basis on which God deals savingly with sinners is not justice but mercy." (Stott, 268)

2. Obligation or gift?

"Mercy by its very definition cannot ever be an obligation. To say that mercy is 'unfair' is to say that it is owed to all. But a mercy is undeserved, and thus is totally free." (Keller, 64)

3. The mystery of God's sovereignty and human responsibility

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'for this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'...So then He Has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills." (v.17, 18)

4. God gave Pharaoh over to what he wanted

God doesn't harden those who do not first harden themselves. Paul has already stressed

that God gives people over to *'the lusts of their hearts...their dishonorable passions...and debased minds.'* (Romans 1:21,24,26) All God has to do is lift His hand, and we will follow our own stubborn desires.

"It is not unjust either to show mercy to the undeserving or to harden those who harden themselves. The wonder is not that some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all. For we deserve nothing at God's hand but judgment. If we receive what we deserve (which is judgment), or if we receive what we do not deserve (which is mercy), in neither case is God unjust." (Stott, 268)

B. Who we are before a Holy God

1. "None is righteous, no, not one" (Rom 3:10, Ps 14:1)

Jesus said, *"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."* (Luke 18:22)

2. "No one seeks for God" (Rom 3:11)

Sin has blinded us to the truth and beauty of God so that we are unable to desire or choose Him. God acts on our hearts to make us want Him. *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him upon the last day."* (John 6:44)

Because of sin, *"we have lost the ability to see the truth and the desire to choose God. Our human will will never freely choose God unless God breaks in."* (Keller)

3. God must break in

"It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God who has mercy." (v. 17)

"We don't initiate our salvation – we don't even want it. God wakes us up from a helpless sleep; He unlocks us from a helpless state." (Keller, 204)

4. The only proper response is wonder and worship

*"I was dead iniquities, having no eyes to see thee,
No ears to hear thee,
No taste to relish thy joys,
No intelligence to know thee;
But Thy Spirit has quickened me,
Has brought me into a new world as a new creature...
Thou has drawn me with cords of love."* (Valley of Vision)

V. Godly Sorrow and anguish

A. Our tears matter

"You have taken account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?" (Ps 56:8)

B. Our prayers matter

As demonstrated by Jesus' parable of the persistent neighbor: *"Even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. I say to you ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you."* (Luke 11:8,9)

C. The longing to come to the Lord is evidence of His Call

"All the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out."(John 6:37)

VI. The glorious flame of substitutionary love

A. Reflected in Paul

*"I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I wish I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."
(9:1)*

B. Proven in life and death of Jesus

1. Anguish over Jerusalem

"Oh Jerusalem! Jerusalem! The city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not!" (Matt23: 37)

2. Cut off so we wouldn't be

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.'" (John 12:27)

3. Cursed in our place

"Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' - so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit by faith." (Gal 3:13)

Resources

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Stott, John. *Romans: God's Good News for the World*. Intervarsity Pres., UK, 1994