

Bible Study Romans 9

“^{9:1} I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh...”

These verses express Paul's love for his people, the Jews. He is following Christ's words, *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends” (John 15:13)*. Paul is also imitating Christ in his willingness to be accursed in return for the salvation of the people he loved. Elsewhere he wrote: *“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree...’ (Galatians 3:13).*

This expression of love for his people is an appropriate introduction to the rest of the chapter, where he lists the charges against them. *“Because Paul intends to proceed against the Jews, he first assures them that he does not speak out of hatred for them, but out of love, for it pains him that they do not believe in Christ, who had come to save them as soon as possible” (Pelagius).*

Paul lists the enormous advantages that the Jews had in their relationship with God that no other nation had:

“⁴ ...who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; ⁵ of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.”

The Liturgy of St. Basil mentions the blessings of God to the Israelites, and states these blessings prepared the world for the Church.

“Benevolent one, in the end, You did not turn away from Your creation whom You made, nor did You forget the work of Your hands, but because of Your tender compassion, You visited him in many ways. You sent forth Prophets. You performed miracles through Your Saints who have pleased You in every generation. You spoke to us through the mouths of Your servants, the Prophets, declaring to us the salvation that is to come. You gave the Law as an aid. You appointed Angels as guardians.”

“⁶ But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, ⁷ nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham...”

This is a profound statement, with implications for how God defines the term “Israel.” This passage refers to the earliest days of Judaism. The rest of this chapter in Romans refers to a story in Genesis, which provides context necessary. God came to Abraham at his home in modern day Iraq and informed him that he would receive a vast tract of territory, an incalculable number of descendants, and divine favor on him and all his offspring. The first problem was Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless, and past childbearing age.

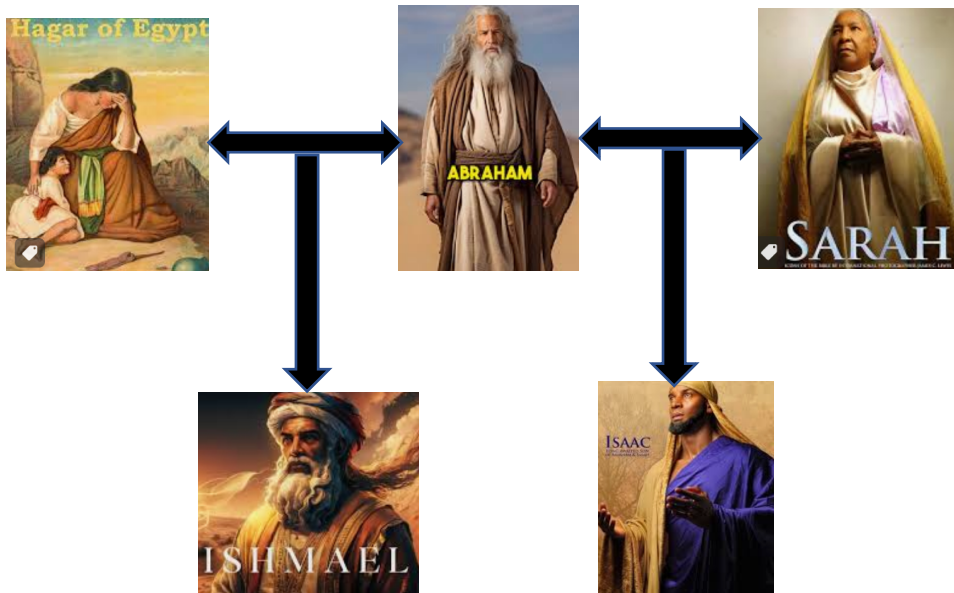
Abraham and Sarah came to doubt that God would someday miraculously provide them with a son, so they took matters into his own hands:

“Then Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes... So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Genesis 16:3-4, 15).

God then came to Abraham and said that Abraham’s son by Hagar would not be the legitimate heir:

“Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year” (Genesis 17:19-21).

The result was two physical descendants of Abraham by two different women:



With this story in mind we can better understand Romans 9:

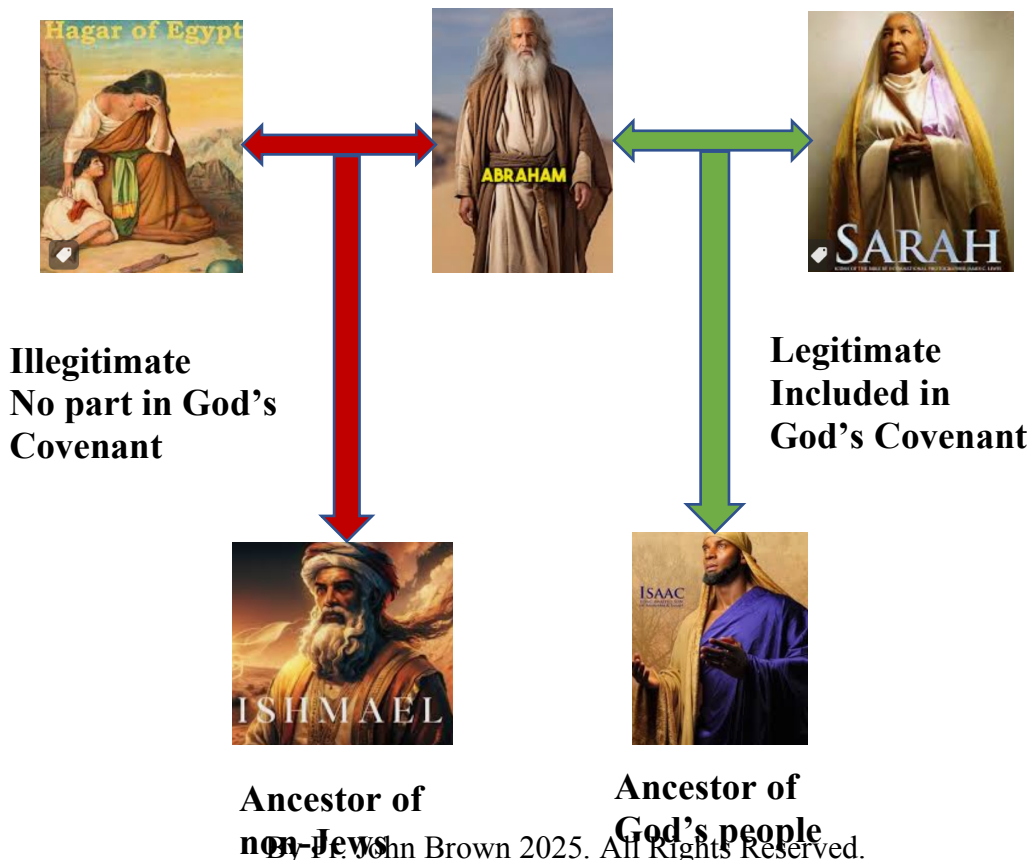
“⁶ But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, ⁷ nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” ⁸ That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. ⁹ For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.”

Isaac, the miraculously-conceived son of Abraham and Sarah, was the father of all the Jews. He is considered one of the first three patriarchs of Israel, and has always been revered as such by the Jewish people. By contrast, they have always considered Hagar as a mere mistress, and her son illegitimate. Paul is reversing this narrative from a Christian point of view. By saying “*For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, ⁷ nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham...*” Paul is saying that the faithful Christians are the true “Isaac,” the child of promise, The Church is the real “Israel” and the real “seed of Abraham.” He is also saying that the faithless Jews - physical descendants of Abraham – are actually the true “Ishmael,” the illegitimate descendants of Hagar the mistress.

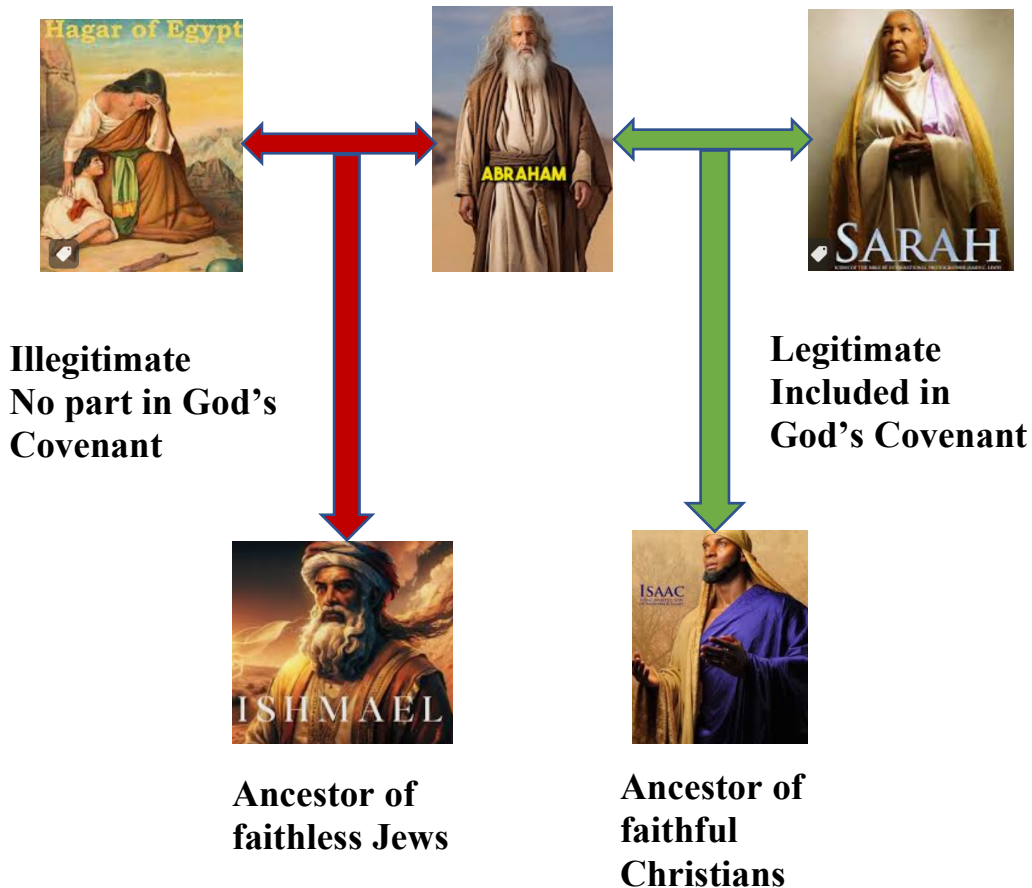
Paul uses this same illustration in the book of Galatians. Addressing Christians, he writes:

“For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic... Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless, what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free (Galatians 4:22-24, 28-31).

This was the Jewish view of Abraham’s two sons by two women:



This is Paul's view of Abraham's two sons by two women:



This was a radical role reversal in God's relationship with Jews and Gentiles. Faithless Jews are like Ishmael, who never was a true son Abraham. Faithful Jews, who along with Gentiles become faithful Christians, are like Isaac – are true offspring of Abraham and inheritors of God's Kingdom.

The next passage addresses the sovereignty of God.

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." ¹⁶ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." ¹⁸ Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens."

God makes sovereign decisions that we do not always understand. None of us chose where and when we were born. None of us chose our sex or race. None of us chose the families and income level we were born into. None of us chose whether or not we were born with disabilities. None of us chose our IQ. God made all these decisions. Most of us understand this fact and accept it as reality for better or worse.

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However, the sovereignty of God, and the seemingly unfair distribution of His blessings can trouble us at times. We all ask ourselves why some people seem to lead a life of health, prosperity, longevity, and seeming happiness, while others do not. This next passage gives us insights how to address these questions.

Job was a person who was uniquely qualified to ask these questions. He was a prosperous man, whom God allowed to suddenly lose his wealth, his children, and his health. His friends told his calamities were the result of some terrible sin. His wife told him to “curse God and die.”

Job did not follow his friends and his wife’s advice, but he did bring his agony to God and asked questions, which could be summarized in one question: “Why are you doing these things to me?” God gave this response:

“Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:

² “Who is this who darkens counsel

By words without knowledge?

³ Now prepare yourself like a man;

I will question you, and you shall answer Me.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Tell Me, if you have understanding.

⁵ Who determined its measurements?

Surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ To what were its foundations fastened?

Or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷ When the morning stars sang together,

And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

⁸ “Or who shut in the sea with doors,

When it burst forth and issued from the womb;

⁹ When I made the clouds its garment,

And thick darkness its swaddling band;

¹⁰ When I fixed My limit for it,

And set bars and doors;

¹¹ When I said,

‘This far you may come, but no farther,

And here your proud waves must stop!’

^{39:1} “Do you know the time when the wild mountain goats bear young?

Or can you mark when the deer gives birth?

² Can you number the months that they fulfill?

Or do you know the time when they bear young?

⁹*“Will the wild ox be willing to serve you?
Will he bed by your manger?*

¹⁹⁻²⁰ *“Have you given the horse strength?
Have you clothed his neck with thunder?*

²⁰ *Can you frighten him like a locust?
His majestic snorting strikes terror.*

²⁶⁻²⁷ *“Does the hawk fly by your wisdom,
And spread its wings toward the south?
²⁷ Does the eagle mount up at your command,
And make its nest on high?*

^{40:1} *Moreover the LORD answered Job, and said:*

² *“Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him?
He who rebukes God, let him answer it.”*

God is telling the sufferer, “I am God and you are not. I have power that you do not. I know things that you do not. A have plans that you do not yet know. Peace, be still. I know what I am doing. Despite your current calamities, your future will be even better than your blessed past.”

Paul may have had this dialogue between God and Job when he wrote these verses, which distinctly resemble it:

*“¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?”
²⁰ But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” ²¹ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?”*

“²² What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴ even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”

Paul is saying that when we observe seeming disparities between those who suffer little and those who suffer a lot, we should remember what God said to Job, in so many words: “I am God and you are not. I have power that you do not. I know things that you do not. A have plans that you do not know. Peace, be still. I know what I am doing. Despite the current calamities of some innocent people, their future will be even better than the current sorrow.”

We see this principle of suffering now, greater blessings later in Christ’s story of the rich man and Lazarus. “*Then [the rich man] cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me,*

and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented’ (Luke 16:24-25).

We also see this principle of innocent suffering now, greater blessings later in the Beatitudes:

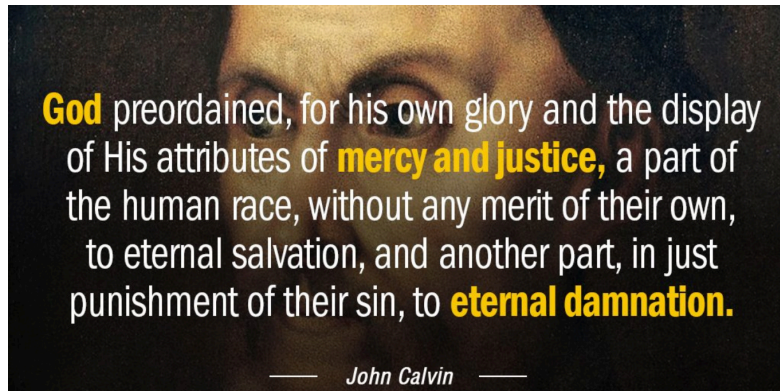
*“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)*

These words of God can be dissatisfying. We want to know specifics. God is teaching us to be humble in our ignorance, trusting in God’s infinite wisdom and mysterious judgements, and await a future in which we see all things made right.

While this is the Orthodox response to the mystery of God’s sovereignty and judgements, there is a brand of Protestantism that has a different response. To us, this is a mystery which we cannot explain, and are content to leave it as such. However, a rather small sect called the Reformed tradition that has devised a doctrine that claims to fully explain the mystery. They call it “predestination.”

This doctrine teaches that when God decided to create the human race, He decided which ones He would save and which ones He would not. That choice is known only to God. Those whom God has decided to be saved will be saved. They have no choice in the matter. Those whom God has not chosen to save will not be saved. They have no choice in the matter. There is no such thing as human free will.

The founder of Reformed theology is John Calvin, one of the original leaders of the Protestant Reformation. His doctrines are often referred to as “Calvinism.”



“All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ: enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly...

The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice” (Westminster Confession).

Reformed theologians claim this passage from Romans 9 as proof of predestination:

*“¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?”
²⁰ But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?”²¹ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?”*

“²² What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction...”

Calvinists also claim these verses from Romans 8:

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

Orthodoxy rejects any assertion that human beings have no free will. Without that free will, we are no longer human. We become robots. Orthodoxy rejects any vision of God as creating billions of human robots for the specific purpose of sending them to hell.

We simply accept that there are some things about the God, Who “moves in mysterious ways,” that we do not know and cannot know. Orthodoxy accepts the general principle of mystery. Therefore, when we read in Romans 9, “*Therefore He has mercy on whom He*

wills, and whom He wills He hardens,” or “Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified...” in Romans 8, we accept the message God gave to Job, and Christ gave in the Sermon of the Mount. Paraphrased, that message from God to us is: “I am God and you are not. I have power that you do not. I know things that you do not. I have plans that you do not know. Peace, be still. I know what I am doing. Despite the current calamities of some innocent people, their future will be even better than their current sorrow.”

When Calvinists are asked, “why did God choose to save some and not others,” they will say it is a mystery beyond human understanding. Despite being deeply influenced by Western rationalism, they still do not escape mystery as hard as they try. We Orthodox prefer our mystery to that of the Calvinists.