

# THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

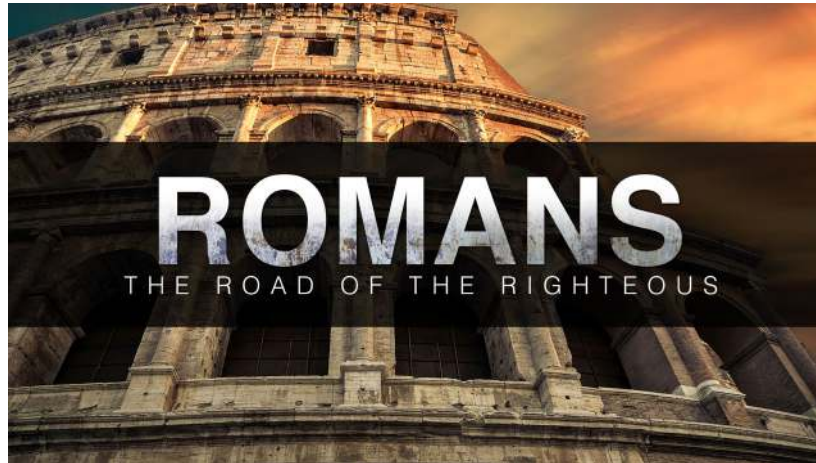
## Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 9:14-21

Written By

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**H**ave you ever questioned God? I mean, have you ever had it out with Him because of something tragic occurred you felt was off the theological grid? I've been there.

I grew up on the Mexican border with another boy named Robert Ramero. Years ago I told you his story, but some stories are worth repeating because of what they teach you and others. Robert's story is such a tale

As young baseball players, we grew up playing against each other. In our triple A high school, we, who were former opponents, all played with each other. Robert was our catcher, and a good one at that. If you wanted to know a tough athlete, he was the man. If you wanted to know a jokester, you would want to meet him. If you wanted to know someone who would taunt you as you ran the bases as he and the coach hit balls to the infield, there was none better than he. If you wanted a young man who would ask you theological questions, he lived to pose them to you.

All during high school, he asked me many questions about Jesus, sin, and the gospel, yet he would never come to a point of making a decision to follow Christ. One day while in the library studying for a German 4 vocabulary test, he walked over to my table, sat down and started in with the theological queries. Later, since I hadn't studied as much as I wanted to, I sat at my desk and prayed, "Lord, you know I just witnessed to Robert again, so I need you to help guide my hand on this test." That technique, by the way, didn't work. *Was für eine Schande*, as the German's would say, or What a pity.

After high school, Robert joined the Air Force and was stationed in Northern California at Travis air base. I attended Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles. I also sang in the fifty-member

Male Chorale. While traveling from doing concerts in Arizona and New Mexico, we passed through my home town of El Centro where we did a concert in my home church. While there, my parents sat me down and told me Robert had tragically died in an automobile accident. He fell asleep at the wheel of his car while traveling north on Interstate 99. As the car rolled he was ejected and the vehicle land on top of him, killing him instantly.

Angry and sad, I drove to the baseball field where we had practiced during high school. I walked all over that field and let God know what I thought about Robert's death: How could you permit this when I was willing to witness to him? How could you let this happen when he was so close to the kingdom? How can this death be just?

Weeks later back in L.A. I received a phone call from a friend. "Marty, did you hear about Robert?" "Yeah, I heard," I replied. "Did you hear why Robert was on the freeway that day?" my friend asked. "No." He then gave me divine insight I will never forget, "Robert had traveled almost the distance of the State of California to tell his parents he had become a follower of Jesus Christ."

With that one sentence, all of my skewed questions about the sovereignty of mystery of God's will vaporized. With that one sentence, I saw the limited, finite nature of my observations about the tragic events of life. With that one sentence, I learned that God's does, in fact, work good to all those who love Him in ways beyond human comprehension and understanding. With that one sentence, I learned to never arrogantly pose pointed, prickly questions to God ever again.

The Jews Paul addressed in the church in Rome had yet to learn about the wise, perfect, and loving sovereignty of God. They struggled with the fact the gospel of justification by faith appeared to annul all of God's promises to them as His former chosen people (Deut. 7). They had a hard time understanding why God would elect and choose Gentiles to be His people, along with Jews, when *they* had historically been elected and chosen by Him. Smarting, somewhat, from the practical ramifications of Paul's teaching, they collectively had many questions on their minds. In chapter nine of Romans, Paul, like a loving shepherd and skilled teacher, methodically works his way through their questions so they could have wisdom and insight into the plan and purposes of the living God.

Before we delve into these Jewish-inspired questions, please realize that God is in the business of answering your questions. No, He is not obligated to answer all of your queries; however, there are times when He, through a variety of ways, brings crystal clear insight into those questions troubling you. So don't be afraid to pose your questions to Him, and do be prepared for answers. Understand, also, that sometimes His silence is all the answer you need, so embrace it, as well.

By way of review, the over-arching question of the entire section, composing chapters 9 through 11, is articulated well starting, as we have seen, in verse 6. In light of God's special selection of the Israelites and covenantal blessings, followed by their reception and unfortunate rejection of the Messiah, Jesus, the Jews of Rome had questions Paul anticipated and answered in a diatribe (question/answer) format.

## Jewish Questions Naturally Arose From Paul's Teaching About The Gospel Of Jesus (Rom. 9)

I understand. These Jewish questions about the sovereign election of God, whereby He chose to bless some and not others in history, are probably not your questions; however, I'm sure you have question right now on the tip of your tongue. Something occurred in your life which rocked your thinking and world, and you, for whatever reasons have formulated a question for God you just

can't seem to get past, a question which, like a cancer, eats away your soul. I think Paul's answers to the Jews of his day concerning God's loving, all-wise free will choices in history will serve to put some of your questions to rest so you can move one.

### Question #1: Does Israel's Spiritual Failure And Rejection of The Messiah Nullify God's National Promises (Rom. 9:6-13)?

**Answer: No, Because God Sovereignly Chose Israel.**

All throughout Jewish history, God strategically winnowed the chosen line and chosen people down based solely on His wise sovereign choice. He didn't choose all the children of the initial patriarchs to be His people, but only they ones He deemed appropriate for His lofty, sometimes mysterious purposes. His selection of the deceiver, Jacob, over the hunter and man's, man, Esau, illustrated the precise and laser-like choice of God when He selected the ones who would be the progenitors of His chosen nation. Obviously, His choices would probably not have been our choices, for we like ancient Israel, look at the external marks of a person, not the internal (1 Sam. 16:7). Truly, His ways, as we have learned, are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9), but it is His ways which sometimes cause us to continue to question Him. Such is what we encounter after Paul answers this initial Jewish question. From our perspective, we would call these follow-up questions, or questions which are logically derived from the initial query. I'm sure you can relate in your discussions with God. I know I can.

### Question #2: Do God's Precise Choices Demonstrate He Is Unjust (Rom. 9:14a)?

The question is articulated by Paul in verse 14, and it naturally arose from his answer to the previous question.

<sup>14</sup>What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? (Rom. 9).

I'm sure Paul fielded this question from Jewish people many times before. It ran like this: "Since God chose Isaac and not Ishmael and Jacob and not Esau, apart from anything they did to garner His favor, to be His blessed people, how, really, is this fair and just, Paul? Your argument leaves us wondering if God is truly just. Yes, Paul, if God, based on nothing but His sovereign choice, determined who would be blessed and who would not be richly blessed, then, this smacks of injustice." Isn't this how we typically respond when God does something we don't agree with? God, how could you be totally just in taking Robert? Where is/was your justice with the multiple suicide bombers walked into various churches in Sri Lanka last Easter morning and ruthlessly blew up unwary, innocent Christian worshippers? How quick we are to question God's character and His ways.

In light of this, permit me to give you some much needed insight: One must be careful in the nature and tone of questions he poses to God. It is one thing to seek insight from God into a complex issue, or a thorny, troublesome, seemingly incongruent passage of Scripture, but quite another to call His character into question. Tread lightly when you speak with Him, and be respectful for He is infinite and you are finite.

## Answer: No, Because His Character Pulsates With Righteous Purpose (Rom. 9:15-18).

What is Paul's definitive answer? Here's how he puts it:

<sup>14</sup>What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! (Rom. 9).

μη γένοιτο, viz., *may it never be*, is the strongest way to say "No" in Koine Greek. Paul buttresses and validates his strong negative reaction by giving two Old Testament examples concerning God's righteous choices. The first example demonstrates, unequivocally, that . . .

*God's Character Reveals He Is Righteous & Just* (Rom. 9:14-16). This is so important. We should not measure whether God is just or unjust against the things we encounter in life, because our viewpoint of said events is highly limited and restricted. Proper measurement must be made against God Himself. How can the God who is the epitome of justice, EVER be accused of injustice? Deuteronomy 32:4 puts His impeccable character in proper perspective:

<sup>4</sup> The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He. (Deut. 32).

Here is further proof from inspired pen of the prophet Daniel:

<sup>14</sup>Therefore the LORD has kept the calamity in store and brought it on us; for the LORD our God is righteous with respect to all His deeds which He has done, but we have not obeyed His voice (Dan. 9).

Job, the oldest book, chronologically speaking, of any book the Old Testament finds one of Job's friends underscoring the righteous, just character of God. Addressing Job's seemingly unjust situation of perpetual suffering, his wise friend, Elihu, put the record straight concerning God's character:

<sup>10</sup>Therefore, listen to me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to do wrong. <sup>11</sup>For He pays a man according to his work, and makes him find it according to his way (Job 34).

God, by definition of His character, could and cannot, therefore, ever be guilty of the charge of being unjust. Perhaps it's time for you to really let this truth sink deep into the hardened soil of your life.

To prove this point concerning the just character of God Paul taps into an incident in the life of Moses and Israel. His quote in Romans 9, verse 15, is from Exodus chapter 33.

<sup>15</sup> For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

The "He" here is God. After Israel's sin with the golden calf while Moses tarried on the holy mount with God, God responded to their unfounded idolatry and spiritual fickleness with swift and deadly judgment. Some 3,000 rebellious Israelites, who chose to worship a false God instead of

the living God who communed with Moses on the holy mount, died for their spiritual apostasy at the hands of the Levites welding swords (Ex. 32:28-29). Question: Was it unjust for God to remove the spiritual apostates? No. When God initially informed Moses on the mount of the nation's quick and illogical return to their idolatrous ways, He, as a just and holy God, wanted to judge the entire nation (Ex. 32:10). Moses interceded and calmed the righteous anger of God (Ex. 32:11-14). His intercessory work before God, led to only 3,000 idol worshippers losing their lives instead of the entire nation of some 2 million people. In this decision God clearly communicated He was, and is, *always* just by nature.

Paul draws this first part of his answer to a close with this interesting statement:

<sup>16</sup> So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy (Rom. 9).

What does "it" denote? It probably references the mercy of God when He makes a selection of one person over another. As in Israel's sin with the golden calf, the sin of the one became the sin of the many; however, in this instance God chose to be merciful not upon what people did or didn't do, but purely upon His own free will choice. No one motivated Him to be merciful. That fact He was merciful merely shows mercy was His sovereign, free-will choice. So, how can He, then, be seen as unmerciful or unjust? Hence, when He chose to be merciful to Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau, it was His freewill choice to do so when He didn't have to. And, since mercy was His choice, especially in the case of sinful Jacob and sinful Israel, no one can accuse Him of being unmerciful, *nor can the sin of the people He has chosen to be merciful to ever abrogate His sovereign choice of them to be His initial special people.*

Moving from how God's just character is validated by the Word of God in the Torah where Israel was concerned, Paul moves to further substantiate this premise by means of a second example from the Exodus narrative.

*God's Character Reveals He Is Always Purposeful* (Rom. 9:17-18). If God were capricious, arbitrary, and thoughtless, we could rightfully accuse Him of being unjust in His choices of one person over another. But since His character is based on justice and this justice always has a divine purpose, no one can ever dare condemn Him for being unjust in what He does or permits. Paul develops this argument by tapping into God's battle with Pharaoh:

<sup>17</sup> For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth" (Rom. 9).

God sovereignly placed Pharaoh on the planet for one distinct purpose: To demonstrate His supernatural power in and through His battle with the dictator, and to make sure the world knew there was a living God more powerful than the false gods of Egypt. God is sovereign and strategic. As Daniel the prophet notes,

<sup>21</sup> And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding (Dan. 2).

Pharaoh was the potentate of the superpower nation at the time only because God permitted him to be. He raised up this particular man to demonstrate His glory and to lead to the deliverance of His chosen people. This is most interesting, isn't it?

We tend to be overcome with evil rulers and compromised, carnal politicians of our day, but God is not fooled or caught off guard. On the contrary, He permits them to rule and He is using their rule to accomplish His loftier eternal purposes, which we will learn about in due time. For example, prior to the burning of Notre Dame, vandalism and attacks on Christian churches in France had been escalating. Just in February alone there were 47 documented attacks.<sup>1</sup> As sad as this persecution is, the positive outcome is people are being moved to give to churches around the world, and God and the work of His people is being spoken about on a wider scale. For instance, the Notre Dame funding has moved people to give nearly \$2 million in one week to rebuild burned Louisiana churches.<sup>2</sup> God is at work despite the mean-spirited work of modern day Pharaohs.

Concerning the Old Testament Pharaoh, Paul makes this jaw-dropping statement:

<sup>18</sup> So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires (Rom. 9).

When it comes down to God's choice, He does what He desires. If He desires to show mercy to Moses, a murderer, and cause a power-hungry Gentile ruler to grow in his spiritual hardness toward Him, that is His purposeful, not blind, choice. We struggle with God hardening Pharaoh's heart, but we must realize that Pharaoh was, in fact, a rebellious sinner long before God did any hardening of this man's openness to the worship of the true God, as opposed to the false gods of Egypt (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 14:4, 17). He also was spiritually culpable because he did his own hardening in the face of outright miracles of God (Ex. 8:32; 9:12). I never said the balance between the elective purposes of God and our free will was simple to understand. It isn't. On the one hand, God, through Paul's pen, underscores He acts in a just manner when He exercises His free will to accomplish His purposes, while, on the other hand, we, like Pharaoh, are responsible for our actions.

I'm sure every Jew reading Paul's words here got the proverbial point. What shocks Paul is not that God chose some to believe and others to disbelieve, but that He, the Holy One, chose anyone. God had graciously and lovingly chosen the downtrodden Israelites (Deut. 7) as His elect people, but some in the nation, like Paul, had supple hearts towards God's work in and through the person of Jesus, the Christ, while others behaved like Pharaoh in rejecting the outright miracles of the Messiah. God was/is, just in this decreeing balance between believing and unbelieving Jews, and they, in turn, were/are, responsible for their response to the gospel message Paul proclaimed in the first eight chapters. Further, all Jews who entertained Paul's argument had to conclude that their national hardness post-resurrection had, in fact, been used of God to bring His gospel of spiritual freedom from bondage of sin to the Gentiles. How mysterious is the sovereign and free-will actions of our just God.

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<sup>1</sup>Brendan Cole, "Catholic Churches Are Being Desecrated Across France-And Officials Don't Know Why," *Newsweek*, April 24, 2019, accessed 4/24/2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/spate-attacks-catholic-churches-france-sees-altars-desecrated-christ-statue-1370800>.

<sup>2</sup>Amanda Jackson, "Notre Dame Fundraising Efforts Inspire People to Donate Nearly \$2 Million to Rebuild Burned Louisiana Churches," *CNN*, April 18, 2019, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/16/us/notre-dame-rebuild-louisiana-churches-trnd/index.html>.

Let us all take pragmatic instruction from this. Sin leads to a hardening of your heart before God. Do you have any sin you need to confess so your heart becomes supple before God (1 John 1:9)? In any event, God is free, from His perfect vantage point outside of time and space, to be merciful to one, like Jacob, and harden another, like Pharaoh. His selection and choice is THE selection and THE choice, hence it is perfect, just, and it cannot ever be overturned by the sin of a person or a people unless God causes it to be so.

This theological discussion logically led to a third follow-up question:

### Question #3: Since God Chooses To Bless or Curse, How Can He Hold Us Accountable (Rom. 9:19-21)?

First, we encounter what I'll call . . .

*The Question Posited (Rom. 9:19).* I have no doubt you pose the logical question Paul poses here. I know I have, many times. Sparring, in diatribe style discourse, Paul articulates the question he has heard from Jews on numerous occasions when he has taught about the sovereign election of God:

<sup>19</sup> You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”

Who couldn't ask this question? We could easily rephrase it: Why does God blame and hold people accountable for their unbelief of the person and work of His Son since their reaction is determined by His lofty, perfect will?

*The Question Pulverized (rom. 9:20-21).* Paul doesn't dismiss the question outright, nor does he run form it. On the contrary, he addresses it head-on in a most robust manner:

<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? <sup>21</sup> Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

His words make you take a deep gulp of air. Really, who are we, the created, to question the Creator? How prideful, selfish, and self-centered we are to think He must answer to us for how He chooses to work in our lives and world.

Questioning God in this fashion was nothing new in Paul's day. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah employed the same argument with spiritually hostile and arrogant Israelites in their days.

<sup>16</sup> You turn *things* around! Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay, That what is made would say to its maker, “He did not make me”; Or what is formed say to him who formed it, “He has no understanding” (Isa. 29:)?

<sup>9</sup> “Woe to *the one* who quarrels with his Maker— An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you doing?’ Or the thing you are making say, ‘He has no hands’ (Isa. 45)?

<sup>3</sup> Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. <sup>4</sup> But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make. <sup>5</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, <sup>6</sup> "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter *does*?" declares the LORD. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel (Jer. 18).

A potter, by definition, can do whatever he wants with the clay on his wheel.

While a student at Azusa Pacific University (1976-1980), I worked as a janitor at night for the school. Every evening I drove up the hillside campus in my new Camaro and clean the art classrooms. One of those rooms contained the pottery room. You can imagine what it looked like. Large stainless steel round pottery wheels were positioned in rows all over the room. I can't tell you how many times I entered that room with my broom to sweep up all the pottery dust with a special oily sawdust-like power, I encountered students working feverishly on projects. Believe me, as I watched them, they did what they, as the skilled artists, deemed necessary to create what they intended upon their slowly spinning wheels.

Listen up. God is no different. If He wants to make you into someone who accomplishes much for His glory in this life, or just a little, this is His doing. If He wants to put you in the heat of the kiln for a short time in order to make you into normal, everyday tableware, this is His free-will choice. If He, conversely, desires to leave you in the kiln for longer so you will be crafted and fashioned into fine china for His glorious purposes, then it is His decision . . . and it is the best decision for He is the loving, all-wise master potter of all potters.

How foolish, then, to think of the clay arguing with Him. How illogical, then, to think the clay could actually formulate viable questions that He should answer. How inappropriate, then, to think that, you, as the clay, are correct in your analysis that what He has taken away from you as He has trimmed away was, in fact, uncalled for and unjust.

The question Jews typically asked couldn't, therefore, have been more off base. God chose to bless Moses with faith and to curse Pharaoh with unbelief. As the master potter of the universe, that was/is His prerogative to accomplish godly, lofty, jaw-dropping goals in this life and in the next life. It is not our place to question Him like pugnacious attorneys, but to simply marvel at His work and to trust that He does know best. It is our place to gain a deeper appreciation for His sovereign will in His elective purposes, along with a sober understanding that we still possess free wills to either bow in faith before the Potter or to reject Him and His ways.

Forty years ago, on a starry desert evening, an eighteen-year-old believer, walked around a baseball field crying and arguing with why God would take his childhood friend in a terrible wreck. Forty years ago a former baseball player was angry at the divine Coach for acting in an unjust, uncompassionate manner from his limited perspective. Forty years ago, through on short phone call, God gave that young man some much needed insight into His ways. Forty years ago, that same young man stopped asking God provocative questions and started pressing on in faith no matter what because he knew the Coach, the Potter, was and is just and wise in all the things He brings our way in this life. I was that young, broken-hearted, and angry young man. But that's not me any longer because He gave me a better understanding of who He is and what He is up to.

Are you that rebellious person right now? Are you angry at God for something which has happened? Do you struggle with what He has permitted? Do you actually think He is unjust? If so, and you call yourself, His child, I invite you this day to lay our rebellion at His feet, while asking Him to show you the other side of the proverbial knotted Persian rug so you can see the beauty He is most assuredly weaving to His glory.