

FAMILY

Romans 9

We have been on a trek, a Himalayan hike up through Romans. Have you ever been on a long journey, so long, that you almost forget your purpose? Before we plunge ahead let's just quickly look back and try and get our bearings. Here is a snippet of what was quoted in the introduction:

Romans is the longest and most systematically reasoned of Paul's letters. Paul announces its theme in 1:16-17: the gospel is God's power of salvation, because it shows us that the righteousness of God is through faith for all who believe. Paul explains the need for justification through faith because of sin (*cf.* 1:16-4:25). He then spells out the results of justification by faith in terms of both present experience and future hope (*cf.* 5:1-8:39).

Do you recognize that as you have come this far you have actually reached two major mountain plateaus? You may have paused and clearly seen them, or because you were thinking about where you just came from, or what lay ahead, you might have missed them. The two are our need for justification by faith and the results of justification. Let's just look back.

We wound our way through the first four chapters of Romans, you may remember it. As I tried to unpack it, I asked two questions and pointed out that there are three kinds of people, and all of that was trying to get you not only to understand Paul's point of view, but also to ask if you agreed with it. Do we agree that all of us need to be justified by faith, all other paths lead nowhere? With great persistence Paul argued that first of all we need to be saved, and

secondly he argued not only that we cannot do it ourselves, but that we cannot, and should not, take credit for adding even one little ounce of our good work to that part of God's action. That is the first plateau we stood upon.

Then we continued pressing up to the end of Romans chapter 8. In these chapters the wonder of grace, the glory of grace, the message of grace, was being presented. You would have thought it would have felt like a beautiful party, but of course it was more climbing. Paul was answering his critics who said, "Well, if grace comes from sin, then let's keep on sinning." Do you remember that bit? He spends chapters 5-8 giving us both this Good News and disarming his critics, until we reach that wonderful grand conclusion that nothing can separate us from the love of God that we find in Christ Jesus. Nothing! This is the second plateau we stood upon.

Before I go on, I am not sure if amidst this letter or legal brief (as I have called it) you have come across those verses which are gems, verses like 8:28 or 8:38-39. Sometimes when I am on a hike I miss the beauty. Let me encourage you to linger over a few of them, I will try and point them out along the way.

So where are we? We are standing on the plateau that says nothing can separate us from the love of God that we find in Jesus Christ our Lord. You might just want to stay here, but we press on. The next three chapters deal with a serious issue. It is a serious issue for Paul and if we are going to be people who claim that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish carpenter, is the Son of God, the Messiah, the *Jewish* Messiah, then we have to look at a serious question: What about the Jewish people in all of this? That is what Paul, a Jew's Jew, is leading us through. Paul begins chapters 10-12 with a personal note. He writes of his anguish over them, his longing for

their salvation, and his conviction is that God has not rejected them. This is not a mere intellectual matter;¹ it is about family, and family is much deeper than mere intellect.

Let me give you a thumbnail sketch of chapter 9 as he goes about approaching this deeply personal question.

First, his deep personal connection is expanded beyond verses 1-3. In verses 4-5 he lists eight (yes, really eight) unique privileges that the Jewish people have received.

From there he adopts a method we have seen before: asking and answering questions. The questions have to do with Israel's situation. If they are the Chosen People, then what has happened? He asks (and answers):²

1. Has God's Word failed (v.6)? Of course not, and he makes that point in the subsequent verses.
2. Is God unjust (v.14)? Again, of course not; both mercy and judgment are compatible with justice (v.18).
3. Then why does God still blame us (v.19)? Here Paul spends 10 verses describing how some might have a wrong view of God. Does not the potter have the right to shape his pottery, and does not Scripture, since the beginning speak of the inclusion of the Gentiles?
4. What then shall we say in conclusion (v.30)? The acceptance of the Gentiles is due to God's mercy and then some of Paul's own people stumble over Jesus. Yet they don't have to.

¹ The Bible Speaks Today, Stott, p.263.

² Ibid.

The situation with his own ethnic family is not fully addressed; two more chapters will be needed. In chapter 9, we have read Paul's reasoning with respect to God's purpose, and it is not one that is opposed to his Chosen People. God is not opposed to any of his family, for this is not just an ache in Paul's heart, but in God's. We know this ache, don't we? We all have or want to have families, but it is never perfect, and when it is not we ache. Matters of family are important, and you are members of God's.