

The Comfort of Election

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I Like sports. I grew up loving sports. The first memory I have of sports, was sitting down with my dad to watch Michael Jordan play basketball. It was the 1998 NBA finals and the Bulls and Michael Jordan were playing the Utah Jazz. It's the first sports memory I have, it's also the first memory I have of my contrarian nature peeking itself through. Because instead of root for Jordan like everyone else, I had to different. I had to root for a team that made it to finals twice ever, and lost both times to the same guy.

There is a difference between 8 year old me watching those games and being interested by it, and 30 year old me watching and loving it now. I understand it. I understand the game. I know the rules inside and out. I can conceptualize the strategy based on matchups, based on game script, based on score and timing. If that means nothing to you, or you are lost in this example, perfect! For those that have never been interested, or cared, or even watched a game of basketball, for those that have no idea of the rules or how to play, what if I asked you to come play hoops with me this afternoon? A pickup game at the park? And say you showed up and tried to play. You'd be overwhelmed. You'd be uncomfortably out of place. You wouldn't know where to be, what to do, you'd break all sorts of rules. You'd be lost. Same goes if you put me in ice skates, threw me a hockey stick, and told me to go play hockey.

There is a relationship between knowing the game, understanding the rules and strategies of the game, and then playing, enjoying, and even succeeding at the game. Such is the relationship between knowing the doctrines of God, the truth of God's word, what God is like, the commands that God gives, and then living life as a Christian, experiencing the implications of truth and doctrine, and obeying the commands of God.

Trying to live life as a Christian without knowing what God is like, without knowing who he is and who he wants us to be, is like trying to play a sport without knowing any of the rules, or strategies or nuances of what it is you're doing. Conversely, there can and are men and women so consumed with doctrine and theology so disconnected from the experience of living life outside of the mind, that it's like a sports fan never watching or enjoying the sport but studying the rulebook day after day. Neither makes any sense. Doctrine for the sake of doctrine, and application without truth to hold it together. Both problems litter the religious section and Christian Life sections at bookstores, and yet God in his word would make no distinction. You cannot have one without the other.

The text we are in this morning is going to hold that tension. And the topic, as you probably noticed in the reading, will be a challenging one for both our hearts and our minds. The sovereignty of God, specifically a God who choses, election. But I say all of this at the beginning, because it's so important that we frame our reading, our sturdy, our meditation, and our response to God's word as he would have us. Not as an academic exercise, nor as some hyper-practical self-help book. But as the abiding word of God, meant to pierce us to the heart, and shape our life. Meant to shape our emotions and affections, meant to provoke our minds to know God as he has revealed himself to us, meant to

produce faith in the gospel of Jesus and repentance of sin, and meant to transform us into the glory of the firstborn of the dead.

This morning what we will see is **With the gospel in view, the doctrine of election is one of the Christians greatest comforts and confidences.** A bold and emphatic statement. Fortunately for me it's not I that am going to make that argument but Paul himself. Our foray into the murky waters of this topic isn't going to be totally typical. We are going to spend the first half of our time framing Romans 9. Because if you can count, there are 8 whole chapters that help frame everything we just read. So tonight we are going to see Paul's argument for the aforementioned statement in this order.

1. The Glories of the Gospel, 2. The Broken Heart of Unbelief, 3. The Comfort of Election.

A hard task for us this morning is context. It's so important with any text, to understand what comes before it. How did we get here? Because to drop right into Romans 9, it wouldn't be hard to see a theological treatise on the doctrine of God's Sovereignty and election. But if you read Romans 1-8, not only will Romans 9 make more sense, but it will be far more affecting. And it will most certainly not be a stodgy doctrine or truth that we are afraid to talk or think about.

This sermon is the product of spending all last year in Romans with GCF. And the subsequent conversations and discipleship with students. They had the benefit of context every week. When you start at the beginning, you get it all. We will grab some key texts and themes, and try to paint a 10,000 ft view of what God is accomplishing up to our text this morning. With that, let us try the best we can to capture what God reveals and emphasizes in Romans 1-8.

Romans is a unique letter of Paul's, unlike most of his other letters to churches, he had not yet been to Rome. He has heard of the church, people he loves are at the church in Rome, people he taught and disciplined are teaching and caring for the church in Rome. So because he'd never been there, Paul's letter is less specific. Where his other letters address specific weaknesses, specific practical and theological struggles that the churches are having, sometimes specific people, this letter doesn't have that specificity.

Instead, what Paul provides here is the gospel to Jews and Gentiles. The gospel as the fulfillment of the OT, and the gospel as fulfilling what is lacking in the paganism of a polytheistic Roman culture. Basically, it's the gospel. The most complete commentary and explanation of the gospel of Jesus in the whole of God's word is the book of Romans. And so much of that richness is in chapters 1-8. Our first point this morning is contained in only 8 chapters. **1. The Glories of the Gospel.**

As Paul opens his letter, and shares his longing to go to Rome and teach and love them, he says this in **Romans 1:16-17.** He says he wants to visit them, a gentile city with a gentile people, because the gospel isn't ethnocentric. Through faith, Jesus is for everyone. And with that faith comes a shared righteousness with Jesus.

Then in verse 18 of chapter 1, Paul spends the next couple of chapters exposing sin in the heart of Jews and Greeks, in other words, sin as a simple reality for everyone. Whether under the Jewish law of Moses, in our own conscience, or in the standards we hold others to that we inevitably fail ourselves.

For several chapters Paul exposes sin in the hearts of the religious and the irreligious. Culminating in three verses, **Romans 2:5**, and **Romans 2:12**, and **Romans 3:23**.

God must judge the sin and sinner if he is to be just (2:5). Both the religious and not, are accountable to God for their sin (2:12). And that both the religious and not have sinned, making all accountable to God and his judgement. No one is outside the bounds of God righteous rule.

But verse 23 continues, **Romans 3:23-25a**. All throughout the first 8 chapters of Romans are these two three or four verse sections that contain the beauty and wonder of the gospel as it pertains to the sinner. This is one of them! The individual sinner as we would sit before the cup of his wrath and judgement. Rather than God pouring his wrath upon the sinner, Jesus steps in as a substitute, receiving the wrath of God as I sit in my filth of sin. Thereby satisfying the wrath my sin and rebellion deserved. Jesus sent by the Father, planned in eternity past, knowing the weak frail creatures we would be, sent Jesus to stand and receive the wrath that I would deserve. And because of his grace, through faith, merely faith, I can stand justified before God, not condemned.

Moving forward through the rest of chapter 3 all the way through chapter 7, Paul contrasts faith and the law (earning righteousness before God). He describes faith in the context of Abraham, and the OT people of God. Through the covenants and promises that God had made. And he specifically links faith to the fulfillment of his covenant with Abraham. **Romans 4:13-17a**. Unifying Jew and Gentile once again, as one people, a people not of the law but of faith. Offered not to a people, but all people. Abraham a father not of one nation but many nations. Unified not by blood or country, but by a saviour.

Through it all he's comparing and contrasting faith and law-keeping. Demonstrating how faithful law-keeping as a means to receive the promises in covenants of God was an impossibility. In other words, pleasing the Lord through obedience and worship, under the determination, conviction and strength would leave anyone a broken failure. And that even Abraham, the father of God's people, was not not justified before God because of his obedient law keeping, but by his faith.

Then comes everyone's favourite chapter in Romans, chapter 8. Opening with **Romans 8:1-4**. Another beautifully concise descriptor of the gospel of Jesus. Life offered in Jesus, a relief from the self-righteousness of law-keeping and trying to earn a place before God. What the law and the flesh cannot accomplish through determined and yet failing faithfulness, Jesus himself would do for his people. Where we or anyone would fail and stand condemned, Jesus stepped in that we might no longer stand under the condemnation of our failed law-keeping. But stand tall in a new life. One not lived by or for ourselves, but by the Spirit to the glory of God.

And with that new life comes the Spirit of God himself, to each and every believer. That living in obedience and worship might actually be possible. **Romans 8:9a, 11**. The Spirit of God himself is with every believer giving conviction of sin, cultivating affections, shaping minds. Giving the believer life. Giving the believer purpose. Giving the believer a status before God we could never have hoped to achieve on our own: sonship.

Romans 8:14-15. Adopted children of God himself. Adopted into the family of God, to the point we can call him 'Father.' Not as a title for first member of the trinity Father, but *Abba Father*. That is the address that Jesus gives to God in his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14. It's an intimate, familial, affection of a father and son. A phrase that tries to capture in language, and affection and love that just can't be described. The love of a parent and a child. That is the love and affection that the Christian receives as we are adopted as sons and daughters of God most high.

But the love of Abba Father does not end with only the relationship, but extends to the inheritance as well. **Romans 8:16-17.** Not only do we get to call him Father, but he bestows upon us, his adopted children, the inheritance reserved for Jesus. This happens as Jesus dies in our place. You see it wasn't just our filthy sin raggs that were transferred at the cross. Yes, Jesus took our sin. But as Jesus rose from death he clothed, transferred to each and every believer, brothers and sisters, the pristine purity of his righteousness. Everything that Jesus earned by living a perfect life while on earth, he gives to us as an inheritance. Namely eternity to spend with him, with our Abba Father, and with our brothers and sisters in the Spirit.

Paul closes chapter 8 talking about suffering and the goodness of God. **Romans 8:18-19.** After all of that, all that we just ran through just scratches the surface, after all that, what is this present suffering? After the grace of God in salvation for all people, not just Jews; after sitting in sin and filth and deserving judgement yet receiving none; after Jesus stepping in to receive that wrath; after fulfilling the covenants in Jesus so that all that remains is faith and not an impossible weight of self-righteous and yet crippling law keeping; after justification not by excellence in obedience but by faith; after receiving the Spirit of God himself to be empowered to excellence in obedience; after being adopted as children of God into a relationship deeper than words can even scratch; after receiving and inheritance we didn't earn. What is suffering? What is trial and hard when I've received more in the gospel of Jesus than I could earn in 100,000 lifetimes!

In the end, **Romans 8:28-30.** Even in suffering we can trust the Jesus that stood for us on the podium of our judgement. Even in suffering I can know God is good. And I can be certain that God loves his people. No one can take that love away. Nothing can get in the way of the goodness, the mercy, the kindness, the adoption, the justification, nothing can get in the way of the love of God. **Romans 8:31-39.**

That frames Romans 9. Again, scratches the surface. An appetizer sampler of what Jesus offers in the gospel. And yet even that taste is dizzying! A beauty too grand for words. A gratefulness that we could never repay. A new reality that we had nothing to do with. That frames Romans 9. And I, get that. All of that. Who am I? You, get that. Who are we to deserve such glories? Such gifts?

And yet with those gifts, comes new eyes, new eyes to see what we couldn't before. New hearts with an affection not only for our Saviour and our Father, but a new heart for those around us. That this offer to all people everywhere might not be missed by anyone. Especially those we love.

As a culture, we are deeply self-centered. We are selfish, specifically in the West, and even more specifically in our country. There is a deeply rooted tunnel vision of the world and reality that focuses solely on the individual. The world around us preaches to us the importance of you, in being happy,

healthy, wealthy, and satisfied in whatever way you want or need. You don't have it? Buy it. You can't buy it? Well here's something you can. All in the name of satisfaction, happiness and contentment. A culture discipling you on what you need to be happy. Whether that's a wart cream, a diet supplement, a travel experience, a strategy for wealth, or a hobby to invest your heart in. A consumerism preaching and constantly delivering stimulation that we might be satisfied, and when we aren't we are entertained and distracted.

And even if it's not me, it's family. Caring for, providing for, loving our kids and parents and siblings. A good thing, that has become a primary thing, a god thing as Keller would say. Often in the initial arrival of longer hours, later nights, earlier mornings, is a desire to work hard to give to our children and our family what we didn't have, all that they need to flourish. Provide the best education we can. The healthiest food and lifestyle. An example of the virtue of work ethic. Yet our selfish hearts twist what is initially a good and sacrificial thing, into a selfish and prideful one. We justify in our hearts longer work hours so we can buy more things, and have more experiences. Somehow, when God gave parents the responsibility to care for and protect their children, I don't think he was thinking about independent wealth, early retirement, or the American dream.

Greed, selfishness, and pride masquerading as work ethic, providing for our families (or ourselves), self-care, and self-help. This matters because it frames us. It frames cultures' influence on our faith and our priorities.

I think, over the last decade or so, the western church has been on a journey of recovery from these insidious lies. The first and second greatest commands are invoked and given significant air time in pulpits and Sunday school rooms, stabbing at the heart of what has become a weak and corrupted American Evangelicalism.

And as the gospel is emphasised, and takes root at the heart of churches and communities, the selfishness of thinking of ourselves first, is assaulted with a love for neighbor that would serve and even sacrifice. Such is the heart of Paul. A heart that would joyfully endure imprisonment, beating, stoning, shipwrecks, spitting and mocking, all so that someone else might know and cherish the truths of Romans 1-8.

Paul spends 8 chapters philosophizing the realities of the gospel, mustering up all the superlatives and affectionate language he can to even scratch the surface of the wonders that the Christian receives and gets to take part in. Finishing with the poetic beauty of God's impossibly perfect love and goodness. Only to be left with anguish and a broken heart. **2. The Broken Heart of Unbelief. Romans 9:1-5.**

The reality for Paul was that the great glories of chapters 1-8, as much as they taught and reminded him of who he is in Christ, and what he has in the gospel, showed him how much his Jewish brothers and sisters are missing. Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh are the natural born Jews who have rejected Jesus and now persecute the church. The very people now imprisoning and beating and mocking him. Paul's love for others was only matched by his love for Jesus. He loved his neighbors so much, that his reaction to all the implications of the gospel was deep and profound sadness for those, specifically his people, the Jewish people, that would miss out on calling God, Abba Father.

His people had it. God chose them, offered them all that he now has in Christ, and they rejected it. **Romans 9:30-32.** They rejected Jesus, and rather chose Barabbas. They rejected righteousness by faith in the Son, and opted for righteousness by faith in themselves. And Paul is broken over it.

Broken to the point that he would offer what no one would offer. His own place as co-heir with Jesus. **Romans 9:3.** Paul no doubt had Moses' words in his heart as he wrote this. After Moses came down from the mountain with the Lord, Israel had made a golden calf to worship as a substitute for God. Moses was broken. Angry and broken. Moses returned to the presence of God on the mountain. **Exodus 32:31-32.** If it were possible, Paul would welcome anathema, if it would mean salvation for his people.

The joy of the gospel that pierces our dark hearts, also provokes an immense sadness, and overwhelming burden for those we love, whose hearts are absent the light of Jesus. As the joy of the gospel pierced my heart at 20 and even as I went through chapters 1-8 with GCF, I wasn't nearly as affected like Paul for others. I'm too selfish for that. Then as we arrived at verses 1-5 here, and we start to consider the joy and gifts of everything that came before, how could Paul be in sorrow?! How could we offer to give it all up!?

As I considered my apathy, my selfishness, and myopic self focus, my heart sank. I was grateful, that selfishness was exposed in me, the Spirit of God doing work. But a sinking feeling, a sadness, an anguish, as my family comes to my mind. As I think of my friends. As I think of old co-workers. As I thought of the barista that makes my coffee.

A painful reality for every Christian, is that there are those that are not sitting under that same grace and mercy and love that we are. And that should be painful. That should be anguish. Paul himself is on his knees praying that God would rescue his people if it meant being accursed himself.

Does your heart groan like Paul's? What do you do to answer that groaning? What do you tell yourself to pacify the pain? How do you answer the question, "Lord, why me?" This is when Paul arrives at the doctrine of election. **3. The Comfort of Election**

This is what Paul offers the Romans church. What he preaches to himself. As broken hearts cherish what we are freely given, yet lament those we love that have yet to receive it in faith. This is what Paul says. **Romans 9:6-13.**

Romans 9 isn't a dissertation on the sovereignty of God. It isn't a textbook on election, exploring the theological and doctrinal implications of a Sovereign God and a responsible people. It isn't a lecture on the relationship of decision making between the sovereignty of God and the will of mankind. It's an affectionate, impassioned plea to trust in a sovereign God, a sovereign Abba Father. It's a humble reassurance that the God of Romans 1-8 is the same God of Romans 9-11.

That the good Father, who is working in every little molecule for the good of Paul, the omnipotent Father whose love and care for him won't be moved by the height of a hurricane or the depth of an earthquake, the Father who clothed him in the inheritance of righteousness that Jesus earned, the Father who sent his only son Jesus to stand before the wrath of justice and judgement so Paul

wouldn't have to. That Father can be trusted. Worth more trust than we often offer him, and certainly worth more trust than we would offer ourselves.

Too often we relegate theology and doctrine to the Sunday school room, or the seminary class, but it's amidst the deepest suffering of this letter where Paul offers the most intellectually challenging and one of the most emotionally burdensome doctrines. Election, by way of Jacob and Esau. **Romans 9:10-13.**

Before they were even born, God chose Jacob. Why? Certainly not because Jacob would be some awe inspiring beacon of holiness and righteousness. Even his name doesn't evoke confidence. In Genesis 25 we see the birth of these twin brothers. And as they are being born, Esau was arriving first, but as Esau was being born, Jacob grabs his brothers heel. So they name the younger brother Jacob. Jacobs name means "holder of the heel", or more colloquially understood "deceiver, supplanter." And that name would be proven appropriate, as Jacob would steal, like straight up heist his brother's inheritance from him.

Again, I ask why? **Romans 9:11.** Simply put, so that no one, certainly not Jacob, could claim any kind of right to the grace of God. I mean it was Esau who was working hard for his family the day that Jacob stole from him. If there was anything earned before God, it wasn't Jacob it might have been Esau. So to demonstrate for all people for all time that God's grace is greater than human effort, God chose to have mercy on Jacob. Who would later be called Israel. Through whom an entire nation would be born.

Romans 9:14-18. Yet again a similar answer to why. In Exodus 9:16 God's people, Israel, Jacob the deceivers nation, is enslaved in Egypt. And God sends Moses to rescue them, to warn Pharaoh that if he doesn't release God's people he would send devastation and destruction on Egypt.

And yet God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Why? "I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." How many centuries later are we reading and retelling the events that happened in Egypt as Israel escaped slavery? As the church, what does our reading of these events in Egypt tell us about God's relationship with his people? That nothing, not height, nor depth, nor death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor power or anything can separate God from his people! That God is faithful and will do what he says he will do!

Paul asks a final question in this chapter, really another version of the question we all ask whenever the doctrine of election arrives at our thoughts. **Romans 9:19-24.** His answer here is really a non-answer, at least as far as our curiosities and questions are concerned. An answer that certainly wouldn't satisfy on a debate stage or a classroom. God is God, and you are not. His purposes, in election and otherwise, are not ours to determine or define.

If there is an adequate answer for "God's purposes in election," it is found most clear in **1 Corinthians 1:26-31.** God chose what is weak and foolish in the world to shame what is wise and strong. God did not choose winners. God did not see great things in Jacob, in Abraham or Isaac, in David or Solomon, in fact they are some of the most flawed people in all of scripture. These men aren't winners, they're losers. Yet the good news is that God picks losers. Deceivers and usurpers like Jacob. The weak and

foolish people. To magnify his grace and demonstrate the infinite reach of his mercy and kindness. He chose the likes of David and Jacob. So that no one would ever for even a second believe that the gift of the gospel is given to those that deserve it. Rather it's given to those that don't.

As we arrive at the close of our sermon this morning, I recognize that you may have more questions than answers. I certainly do. There is such a depth to mine here about the sovereignty of God, election, how that fits with what we understand to be human responsibility and decision making. There's a lot of wonderful truth to be sought around it all. But none of that is the purpose of this detour Paul makes into the doctrine of election.

The purpose is an affirmation of anguish over lost souls, and an offer of comfort and hope amidst that anguish. Before we ask all the brain melting questions we demand answers to, because it doesn't make sense, before we enter the debate stage with God's word on this issue, can't we just cherish that the God who elects is the same God who adopts. The God who chooses is the same God that sent his own son to suffer and endure wrath for you and I. The doctrine of election shouldn't only shape the hardest questions we have about our faith. But with the glories of the gospel as it's backdrop, the doctrine of election should be the greatest confidence of weak and foolish people.

My Hope that what we walk away with here today isn't frustration that Paul didn't answer all our questions. But that our experience of adoption, and justification, and salvation, and all the wonders of the gospel, would frame for us a view of election that makes it a glorious and wonderful truth to be cherished. Not one for which excuses or arguments should be made.