



Text: Romans 9:1-29<sup>1</sup>

Series: Right Living: God's Righteousness Transforming Our Lives

Title: Part 13 – The Sovereign Rights of God

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Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

The passage we're looking at this morning is one of the most debated in the Book of Romans, and perhaps in all of Scripture. Many of you here this morning come from the Arminian theological tradition. Many of you come from the Calvinist tradition. This passage is one of the key passages that swing people toward one or other the other of these systems of theology.

But just a word about "systems" as I begin this morning. My mentor in pastoral ministry, Dr Gerald Griffiths, used to frequently say to me: "I have been called by God to preach the Bible, not to preach a system." It's a phrase he borrowed from the great English preacher Charles Simeon and it's a motto I've taken as my own.

Recently I was referred to as a "staunch Calvinist" by one of our people. I looked up the word "staunch" and it means "loyal." I told that person that my personal experience is that those who are truly "staunch Calvinists" call me an Arminian, but strangely my experience is also that truly "staunch" Arminians call me a Calvinist. Well, if both camps refuse to claim me as their own I guess I must be doing something right, because God has not called me to preach a system but to preach the Bible.

When the passage before me emphasizes the need to respond in faith to God, I preach the responsibility of faith. When the passage before me emphasizes the sovereignty of God to dispose of his creation in whatsoever way he wills, I preach the sovereignty of God. When the passage emphasizes both, I preach both because I am a "Bible" Christian, not a system Christian. If you're a staunch Arminian or Calvinist, tell me how you would interpret Jesus' words when he said...

**"All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:27-28**

God chooses – a favourite Calvinist theme. Come all – a favourite Arminian theme. Our human attempt to reconcile these two revelation truths has created

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theological systems that when pushed to their extremes have chosen to emphasize one truth at the expense of the other. I am very comfortable holding them both to be true without the ability to reconcile them philosophically. God is sovereign in salvation AND he invites us all to respond in faith to his offer of salvation.

The passage this morning is one that emphasizes the sovereignty of God in salvation and it is one that I believe will challenge our view of God. It presents a view of a truly free and sovereign God who is not limited in his actions in any way by anything in all creation, including you and me. If you are an average North American Christian, this text will rock you to the core!

People are uncomfortable today with the idea that God is sovereign – that he is a King who is free to choose as he wills. I recently read a review of a book entitled, “Jesus: Made in America.” The author of the book, Stephen J. Nichols, has noted how North Americans have made God into someone who is cast in their own image. As one measure of our view of God, he surveys the lyrics of contemporary Christian music and finds that, “like a good boyfriend, Jesus shows up at the right moment, says the right things and knows how to hug.” The major problem with popular theology, Nichols suggests, is that it begins with our experience, leans on our church traditions and only then references Scripture. The solution to our cultural reduction of Jesus, he says, is to reverse the order and begin with Scripture.

(Colin Hansen, “JesUSAves,” [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article\\_print.html?id=58650](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=58650))

This chapter teaches us that God is a King, a sovereign, who rules in the affairs of mankind to accomplish his purposes. It’s a doctrine that is very uncomfortable for twentieth century Canadians to accept. It makes us uncomfortable to think that God doesn’t ask our permission or solicit our input when he makes his decisions.

Our experience in a democratic society has taught us that there can be “no taxation without representation”...

We expect our leaders to be accountable to us.

We hold elections to choose our leaders and to hold them accountable – we’re in the middle of one of those right now.

We want “town hall meetings” to help shape policy.

We’ve even become tolerant of those who break laws with which they disagree.

We want a limited, controlled government that responds to our initiative and is ultimately accountable to us and on the human level that is a good thing.

But Paul tells us in Romans chapter 9 that we have a sovereign God who chooses to act in human history to accomplish his purposes without asking for our permission or soliciting our input. We need to be clear that the King of the



universe is not a “constitutional monarch” like our queen whose actions are determined by her prime minister. Our divine monarch does not take dictation from his subjects. He is an absolute monarch who rules according to his own counsel and wisdom.

There are three major themes covered in this chapter. First of all, our God is a King who acts in sovereignty to create a people of his own. Secondly, our God is a King who chooses to dispense mercy to whomsoever he wills. Finally, our God is a King who accomplishes his ends in human history on the basis of his own authority.

***Our God is a King who reserves the sovereign right to call together His people on His own terms***

In our study of Romans 8 two weeks ago we noted that God’s plan for us will not fail. Paul wrote...

**“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28**

Paul affirmed to us that nothing in the entire universe...

**“will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:39**

Paul taught us that we can be confident that God will not let us down or let us go! But even as Paul wrote these words two thousand years ago, a question began forming in the back of his mind. As he thought of the people who would read his letter, he began to anticipate a question that might upset everything he was trying to teach them.

God had promised Abraham that he would have a never-ending line of descendants and that God would bless those descendants with his provision and his care. God had promised...

**“I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” Genesis 17:7**

But Paul’s heart was broken by the way in which the descendants of Abraham, his own Jewish race, had rejected Jesus and were now in rebellion against God’s plan of salvation through faith in Jesus.

The question generated by this rebellion in his mind and the one he anticipated in the minds of his readers was this: **did God’s promise to Abraham fail?** Why were so many Abraham’s “offspring” rejecting Jesus as their messiah? Is God



now opting for “plan B,” a gentile church, because he was unable to convince the descendants of Abraham that Jesus was their promised Messiah? And if his plan for Israel failed, can God be trusted to fulfill “plan B,” or any other plan for that matter?

Paul’s answer is that God’s promise to Abraham did not fail because, as Paul wrote...

**“For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel....” Romans 9:6**

In other words, Paul is arguing that not all of Abraham’s descendants are his true “offspring.” “Israel” is another name for Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, and one of the great patriarchs (v.5) of the Jewish race. But “Israel” also came to be the national name attached to all the natural descendants of Abraham. The rejection of Jesus by so many of those natural descendants suggested to some people that God was unable to keep his promise.

Paul was put in the position of defending the King’s integrity and power and he did so in two ways.

**First** of all, Paul argued that **being a member of God’s family is not a matter of natural descent.**

**“This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.” Romans 9:8**

God promised to give Abraham children as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5) but for many years there were no children. Abraham decided to take action to provide an heir for himself. His wife Sarah had been unable to provide Abraham with a son and so she gave him her servant Hagar and through union with her Abraham’s first son was born, a child named Ishmael.

Even though he was Abraham’s first son by natural descent, God told Abraham that Ishmael was not the one through whom His promise would be fulfilled. It was Abraham’s second son, Isaac, miraculously born to Sarah when she was 90 years old and Abraham was 100, whom God used to fulfill his promise as he told Abraham...

**“...through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” Genesis 21:12, Romans 9:7**

Simple natural descent was not enough in order to be a “child of promise.” God’s promise applied to those to whom He chose to apply it, not to those who were simply the product of human decisions. Ishmael was Abraham’s choice; Isaac was God’s choice – God’s chosen child was the child of promise. Abraham had tried to control the fulfillment of the promise; God would not let him do so.



What Paul is saying is that just because people can trace their physical descent back to Abraham doesn't mean that they are recipients of God's promise. Something more is needed than human ancestry and genealogy charts. Being a child of the promise is not a matter of human decision – it is God's choice.

**Second**, Paul argued that **being a member of God's family is not a matter of human merit.**

Abraham's son, Isaac, the one through whom the promise was to be fulfilled, had a wife named Rebekah. She conceived and bore twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the first one to be born, followed by his brother Jacob, grabbing on to his heel. Esau, then, was the firstborn son – the one who had the right to inherit Isaac's titles and property.

But that's not what happened. Before the boys were born, God told Rebekah that he would use the second born son to fulfill his promise, not the one born first. As Paul tells us...

**“though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad — in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls — she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ [Genesis 25:23] As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’ [Malachi 1:2-3]” Romans 9:11-13**

Don't get tripped up by the “love – hate” word play. In Biblical terms it means it means “chosen – rejected” rather than “like – not like.” God chose Jacob; he rejected Esau. And it wasn't because Jacob was a good man and Esau was a bad man – before they had either had a chance to do anything good or bad, God announced his choice that His promise would be fulfilled through Jacob rather than Esau.

Membership in God's family is the result of answering God's call to repent of our sin; it's not a reward for good behaviour. It's a gift of the King to those respond to His call.

Paul's point is that God's creation of a people for himself is not tied to natural descent or to human merit. It is his sovereign right to call together a people of his own choosing through whom he will accomplish his purposes in the world.

The King doesn't owe membership in his family to anyone because of their heritage!

You might have been raised in a Christian home but God doesn't owe you salvation! The popular saying that “God has no grandchildren” is true. Your parents may have been believers but that does not guarantee that you will have



a saving relationship with God. A Christian heritage is a wonderful thing to have (Romans 9:1-5) but salvation is not passed from one generation to the next like your mother's china or your father's favourite hammer. I remember the man who preached at my grandfather's funeral. He looked me in the eye and made it clear that I could not ride my grandfather's coattails into heaven!

The King doesn't owe membership in his family to anyone because of their merit!

You may have served God to the best of your abilities for many years but he doesn't owe you salvation! You may have been a faithful church member for many years – he doesn't owe you salvation! Being a child of promise has nothing to do with the good or bad things you do.

The King does not owe the status of "child" to anyone, but the King is faithful to welcome into His family all those who seek entrance on His terms...

**"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." John 1:12-13**

And the King is faithful to welcome into His family anyone who responds to His call...

**"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."  
Matthew 11:28**

Becoming a child of the promise is not a matter of heritage or merit, it's a matter of faith and trust in God because, as Paul tells us earlier in this letter, Abraham is...

**"the father of all who believe" Romans 4:11**

Being an heir of the promise isn't the product of tracing your ancestry back through Isaac as a Jew or of being a good, obedient follower of God's law. Being a child of the promise is a status that falls to anyone...

**"who shares the faith of Abraham." Romans 4:16**

God's promise to Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars had been kept because, as Paul was writing this letter, there were thousands of Jews and Gentiles who were becoming children of the promise through faith in Jesus. For two thousand years that number has grown and multiplied into millions of children.

The King's integrity and power are uncompromised and intact. The King is not beholding to anyone but he is faithful to keep his promise to anyone who seeks



entrance to his family on His terms. ***Our God is a King who reserves the sovereign right to call together His people on his own terms – and he's doing it!***

**Secondly,**

***Our God is a King who reserves the sovereign right to show mercy to whomsoever He wills***

God chose Jacob and rejected Esau – why? So that the fulfillment of his promise would rest on His sovereign choice alone.

Is God unjust? (v.14)

Is God unfair?

Is God arbitrary?

Does God show favouritism?

Is God a tyrant who acts on his own unpredictable, changeable whims?

Paul says no.

**First**, Paul affirms that **our God is a King of mercy**. He invites us to look at the way God dealt with Moses and Israel during the episode of the Golden Calf. You find the story in Exodus chapter 32.

Moses had just received God's commandments on Mount Sinai. While he was up on the mountain communing with God, the people at the foot of the mountain had degenerated into pagan worship around a golden idol shaped like a calf.

God had just delivered these same people from slavery under the Egyptian Pharaoh, displaying his great power in ten plagues that broke the stubborn resistance of the Egyptian king.

God had just provided a highway through the middle of the Red Sea, enabling his people to escape the chariots of the pharaoh.

God had been personally leading them through the desert for days and weeks with a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night.

God had miraculously provided water from a rock for them to drink and quail from the sky and every day he was providing bread, called manna, on the ground for them to eat.

God had delivered them from battle against a fearsome enemy, the Amalekites.



And now, these same people were spitting in his face, mocking his holiness and sullyng his name by engaging in pagan, immoral drunken worship of a stupid hunk of metal shaped like a beast of the field.

As Moses came down the mountain side and heard and saw the people engaged in sin, God said to him that it was his intent to destroy the whole lot of them and begin again to form a new nation, one that would come from Moses' children. Moses interceded for Israel and God relented, although 3,000 people died in God's act of discipline upon Israel.

God could have rightfully destroyed them all – if the Israelites had asked God for justice at this point, they would have been doomed! Instead of justice, Israel received grace and mercy from God.

Moses wanted to know the character of the God he was following through the desert and so he asked God to reveal his glory to him. And God said to him...

**“And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15**

Notice that God said mercy and compassion and not mercy and judgment. Don't misunderstand, God does show judgment against sin. Remember, 3,000 people died because of their rebellion against God during this episode in the desert. But please also remember that God's primary character is that of mercy and compassion.

Here's the point: if we want justice from God, then we are all doomed! Every one of us is a sinner whose rebellion against God merits only one thing: destruction. God owes mercy and compassion to no one! His grace and mercy are completely free!

And **secondly**, just make God's freedom to act in mercy clear, Paul points to God's dealing with Pharaoh. Paul ramps up his declaration of God's freedom to tell us that **our God is a King whose mercy is completely free**. You'll find this story line played out in the Book of Exodus from chapter 4 through chapter 9.

Moses was commissioned by God to liberate Israel from slavery under Pharaoh and lead them to the Land of Promise. Moses was given miraculous signs to perform before Pharaoh that would show that he was acting with God's authority in demanding Israel's release from slavery. They were potent, powerful signs but God warned Moses...



**“When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.” Exodus 4:21**

In the unfolding story, Moses performs the signs God gave him. For a time Pharaoh vacillates. About 9 times in following chapters it tells us that Pharaoh hardened his heart and about 9 times it tells us that God hardened his heart. Pharaoh goes back and forth -- he makes things harder for the people then offers small appeasements, then finally says the people can leave, only to order his chariot army to pursue them and run them into the dust before they can get to the Land of Promise. As Pharaoh and his army close in, God opens the Red Sea and the army of Egypt is swallowed by the ocean and drowned. End of story; end of Pharaoh.

God’s “powerful arm” is displayed in delivering his people from slavery under the world’s most powerful king. Pharaoh served as God’s foil, the human power that raises its fist against God only to be broken and brought low. There’s a picture here of what Jesus would do against Satan on the cross in defeating and humiliating Satan through His death and resurrection. (cf. Colossians 2:15) Paul quotes God’s declaration of intent in his use of Pharaoh’s rebellion...

**“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.’ [Exodus 9:16] So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.” Romans 9:17-18**

This is where we bow before the sovereign will and power of God! Make no mistake. Paul is saying that God has complete freedom to show mercy or to withhold it because he is a sovereign King who owes no man anything. Our God is a King of mercy but we are **never, never, never** to presume on His mercy!

Looking back, as Paul did, on God’s dealing with the people of Israel in the desert the writer of the Book of Hebrews implores us...

**“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ ” Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Hebrews 3:7-13**

God does not owe us mercy! We are rebels who deserve only judgment for our sin. Don’t expect that someday, somewhere you’ll turn from sin and ask God for



forgiveness. If today you are aware that your life is in rebellion against God, then today is the day when you should turn away from sin and call on God for forgiveness. Don't presume on mercy!

**Finally**, Paul tells us that...

***Our God is a King who reserves the sovereign right to choose the means and the time for accomplishing His purposes***

**“You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’” Romans 9:19**

If Paul's declaration that God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he could use Pharaoh for his own purpose provoked a reaction in your heart and mind, know that you're not alone! Paul knew that his declaration of God's absolute freedom to show mercy or withhold it would provoke a response! If God can work in a person's heart to either move them toward mercy or to harden them in their rebellion, then how can God hold us responsible for our sin?

But in his answer to that question Paul didn't soften his words one iota to take away the edge of his declaration of God's sovereignty.

**“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?” Romans 9:20**

If our Creator chooses to use his creation one way or another to accomplish his purpose, who are we to question his ways? As God said to Job...

**“Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.”  
Job 38:2-3**

**“Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?” Romans 9:20-21**

Our King has **the right to choose how** he will accomplish his purpose.

In our visit to England this summer we toured Windsor Castle. One of the rooms there houses some of the royal china. One set of china in the collection is so elaborate and magnificent that its production sadly bankrupted the company that manufactured it. Some months ago I was watching a documentary on the queen and I was surprised to learn that she uses Tupperware on her breakfast table. China or Tupperware – she can choose how she wants to eat her meals. She's the queen. Our King can choose how he accomplishes his work, too.



Some believers have wealth and advantage – many don't. Why, God, don't I have the financial resources that others have?

Some Christians have health and long-life – many don't. Why, God, has my life encountered such pain and sickness?

Some followers of Christ never know tragedy – many know it all too well. Why, God, have I known such sadness and loss?

The King chooses how we serve his purpose.

**“What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory – even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?” Romans 9:22-24**

Our King has **the right to choose who** he will use to accomplish his purposes.

Some receive wrath; others receive mercy. Paul understands the emotional weight on the hearts of those who long to see friends and family receive God's forgiveness and mercy but who watch their loved ones reject God's grace again and again. Remember, he began this declaration of God's sovereign rights by saying...

**“I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen...” Romans 9:3**

The entire mass of humanity deserves wrath and destruction because of our rebellion against God, but God calls and some are saved. I want you to notice that the Bible never says that God “calls” or “elects” people to destruction. The mystery of salvation is that some are called and elected to mercy. Why only some? Paul doesn't answer that question but he places the emphasis on God's sovereign right to call and elect whomsoever he chooses. On what basis does he call or elect us? Paul leaves the answer with the sovereign mercy and wisdom of God.

Paul brings us into the throne room of God's wisdom and mercy – he leaves us with awe more than answers. The Bible tells us that...

**“the secret things belong to the LORD our God” Deuteronomy 29:29**

and Paul is willing to leave those things undisclosed. He invites us to trust and worship, to bow before the glory of God. He presents to us the vision of a God whose mercy is immeasurable, whose wisdom of unfathomable and whose will is



irresistible. Paul presents to us a vision of a God whose choices are always right and true and he bids us to bow in humble worship before him.

Joanie Yoder writes for Our Daily Bread, the devotional booklet we distribute. In one of the daily devotions she wrote about a young man she had led to the Lord.

“A few years ago,” she wrote, “an unkempt, poorly adjusted youth named Tim (not his real name) was converted to Christ in an evangelistic crusade. A few days later, still unkempt but bathed in the love of Christ, he was sent to my home so that I could help him find a good church. And so it was that he began attending mine.

Though Tim needed and received much loving help in personal grooming and basic social graces, one characteristic has remained unchanged – his untamed love for his Saviour.

One Sunday after church Tim rushed to my side, looking somewhat perplexed. He lamented, “Why me? I keep asking myself, why me?” “Oh, no, I thought,” wrote Yoder, “he’s become another complaining Christian. Then with arms outstretched, he went on to say, “Out of all the people in the world who are greater and smarter than I am, why did God choose me?” With that he joyfully clapped his hands.”

Our King has **the right to choose when** he will accomplish his purposes.

**“What if God ... has endured with patience...”**

Some of want to ask God, “how?” Some want to ask him, “who?” And others want to ask, “when?”

When, God, will you bring an end to pain and suffering?

When, God, will your bring justice to the oppressed?

When, God, will you stop the madness of mans inhumanity to man?

When will God bring justice? When he’s ready!

When will God stop sinners dead in their tracks? When the last one whom he has called and elected to mercy has repented and come to faith in Christ! Will everyone come to repentance? No. Paul tells us that only a remnant of people will be saved. (Romans 9:27)

But God chooses to be patient in his wisdom, mercy and grace.

The Apostle Peter tells us...



**“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9**

Why does God delay? Because his delay gives more people the opportunity to become God’s children through faith in Christ.

Why is God waiting to answer your need? I don’t know why, but I do know that God can be trusted to do what is right.

The King is in control. We do not have all the answers we’d like to have for the hows and whys of life, but God can be trusted..

Don’t presume on the King’s salvation – He doesn’t owe it to anyone, but He offers it freely. Believe his promise and answer his invitation to come to Christ.

Don’t presume on the King’s mercy – He doesn’t owe it to anyone, but he offers it freely. Repent from your sin and rebellion today. Don’t let sin harden your heart – come to him today.

Don’t expect explanations from the King for all the whys and hows of life – he doesn’t owe it to answer you, but your life plays a part in the fulfillment of his purpose in the world – bring your life alongside his will revealed in the Bible and allow the King to reign in you.

Let’s pray

Prayer

- Presumed on salvation? Believe in Jesus and become a child of the King
- Presumed on mercy? Repent today before sin hardens you to repentance
- Insisted on God’s answer? Trust the King

**Invitation to Prayer**

**Final Song:** Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty

**Benediction**