

Romans 9:17–11:32: Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

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Session 11

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Abstract

In this lecture on Romans 9:17–11:32, Dr. Craig Keener examines the deep theological interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Through an analysis of Paul's Old Testament citations—such as Pharaoh, the potter and clay, and Elijah's remnant—Keener demonstrates that God's electing grace is unmerited and that history is shaped according to His glory. He highlights the dynamic of the Gentile inclusion, which is designed to provoke Israel to jealousy and ultimately lead to their eschatological restoration. The lecture serves as a warning to Gentile believers against spiritual pride, reminding them of their root in Israel's heritage and pointing to a unified divine plan where God's mercy extends to all.

Outline

I. Introduction to Romans 9:17–11:32

- **A. Context of the Lecture**

1. Session 11 in Dr. Craig Keener's Romans series.
2. Focuses on the textual unit of Romans 9:17 to 11:32.

- **B. Core Themes**

1. The ongoing theological tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

2. Predestination is grounded in God's unmerited grace rather than human works, merit, or ethnic origin.

II. Divine Sovereignty and Human Choice (Romans 9:17–24)

- **A. The Example of Pharaoh**

1. God raised up Pharaoh as a "vessel of wrath" to demonstrate His signs and wonders (Exodus 9:16).
2. God's ultimate purpose in history is to reveal His power so that His name is proclaimed throughout all the earth.
3. God retains the right to show mercy on whom He wills and harden whom He wills (Exodus 33:19).

- **B. Human Responsibility within Divine Sovereignty**

1. Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15, 32), showing that God's sovereignty does not negate human agency.
2. Divine sovereignty and human choices operate concurrently (e.g., Saul searching for lost donkeys under divine direction; Assyria acting as God's rod of anger in Isaiah 10).

- **C. The Potter and the Clay (Romans 9:20–21)**

1. Paul addresses the interlocutor's objection: "Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His purpose?"
2. He invokes Isaiah 29:16 and Isaiah 45:9 to emphasize the Creator's absolute sovereignty over the created clay.

- **D. Purpose of Enduring "Vessels of Wrath"**

1. God delays judgment and patiently endures suffering to let human history play out for the sake of "vessels of mercy".
2. This delay provides space and opportunity for more people to experience salvation.

III. The Inclusion of the Gentiles (Romans 9:25–33)

- **A. Scriptural Evidence for Gentile Inclusion**

1. Hosea 2:23 and 1:10: Those who were "not My people" will be called "My people".

2. Old Testament precedents (Isaiah 2, 19, 56, and Zechariah 2) show that God always intended to bless and include the nations.

- **B. The Concept of the Remnant**

1. Citing Isaiah 10:22–23 and Isaiah 1:9: Only a remnant of Israel will survive judgment.
2. Demonstrates that God judges all people alike, without ethnic favoritism.

- **C. Righteousness by Faith versus Works**

1. Gentiles did not pursue righteousness but grasped it by faith.
2. Israel pursued the law of righteousness from the standpoint of works rather than faith.
3. The danger of spiritual elitism and looking down on outsiders (allusions to Dead Sea Scrolls sectarianism and Pharisaic views of common people).

- **D. The Cornerstone and Stumbling Stone (Romans 9:33)**

1. Paul blends Isaiah 8:14 and Isaiah 28:16: Christ is both a foundation cornerstone and a stumbling stone.
2. Reflects early Christian stone-testimonia tradition originating from Jesus' own Passover teaching (Psalm 118:22).

IV. Salvation, the Word, and Preaching (Romans 10:1–17)

- **A. The Intended Purpose of the Law**

1. Christ is the end (*telos*) or goal of the law for righteousness (Romans 10:4).
2. Contrast of Leviticus 18:5 ("live by them") with righteousness that is of faith.

- **B. Midrash on Deuteronomy 30:12–14 (Romans 10:6–10)**

1. "Who will ascend to heaven?" is adapted to refer to bringing Christ down.
2. "Who will descend into the deep?" is adapted to refer to raising Christ from the dead.
3. "The word is near you" is applied to the apostolic message of faith preached in their midst.

- **C. Confession and Belief**

1. Salvation requires confessing with the mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in the heart that God raised Him from the dead.
2. Grounded in Isaiah 28:16: "Whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame".

- **D. Universal Scope of Salvation**

1. Joel 2:32: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved".
2. Explains Jesus' divinity by applying Joel's divine name prophecy directly to Jesus.

- **E. The Preaching Chain (Romans 10:14–17)**

1. Sorites chain: Sent -> Preached -> Heard -> Believed -> Called -> Saved.
2. Isaiah 52:7: The beauty of the feet of those who bring good news.
3. Isaiah 53:1: Hearing the message does not guarantee faith; not all who heard believed.

V. Israel's Responsibility and the Olive Tree Metaphor (Romans 10:18–11:24)

- **A. Israel's Exposure to the Message**

1. Citing Psalm 19:4: Creation's voice and the gospel witness leave all without excuse.
2. Deuteronomy 32:21: God will make Israel jealous through a foolish nation.
3. Isaiah 65:1–2: God is found by those who did not seek Him, while Israel remains disobedient.

- **B. The Present Remnant of Israel (Romans 11:1–10)**

1. Paul's personal identity as an Israelite and Benjamite proves that God has not rejected His people.
2. Elijah's protest: God preserved 7,000 who did not bow to Baal, illustrating a persistent remnant.
3. Hardening of the rest: Blending Deuteronomy 29:4, Isaiah 29:10, and Psalm 69:22–23 (spirit of stupor and blind eyes).

- **C. The Purpose of Gentile Inclusion: Provoking Jealousy (Romans 11:11–14)**

1. The salvific turn to the Gentiles is designed to provoke Israel to a healthy jealousy and lead to their restoration.

- **D. The Olive Tree Metaphor (Romans 11:17–24)**

1. The domesticated olive tree represents Israel's heritage and covenant root.
2. Gentile believers are wild olive branches grafted in "contrary to nature".
3. Warning against Gentile boasting: The branches do not support the root; the root supports them.
4. Historic consequences of ignoring Paul's warning (such as Christian anti-Semitism, pogroms, and the Holocaust).

VI. The Mystery of All Israel's Restoration (Romans 11:25–36)

- **A. The Mystery of Partial Hardening**

1. Hardening has happened in part to Israel until the "fullness of the Gentiles" comes in.

- **B. The Final Restoration of "All Israel"**

1. "All Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26).
2. Contrast between the "remnant" and "all Israel" (Israel as a whole, as noted in Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1).
3. Fulfillment of Isaiah 59:20–21: The Deliverer will come from Zion.

- **C. The Reciprocal Cycle of Mercy (Romans 11:30–32)**

1. Role reversal: Gentiles were disobedient, now shown mercy; Israel is now disobedient, to be shown mercy later.
2. God has consigned all to disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

- **D. Doxology (Romans 11:33–36)**

1. Celebrates God's unsearchable judgments and ways.
2. Praises God's exquisite design of history to accomplish His redemptive purposes