Questioning God, Faith in Christ
Romans 9:19-10:4

We're working our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, and we're in a bit - which extends from chapter 9 through to chapter 11, that you can read and go, *'What is this doing here!?'*

Because what comes before - chapter 8 - ends with soaring encouragement that nothing and no one can separate us from the love of God in Christ; and what comes after is chapter 12 with its call that in view of all that God has done for us in Jesus, give yourself to him as a living sacrifice.

But sandwiched between the two are chapters 9-11 and, at first glance, they don't seem to have anything to do with the glories of Christ or our response to that. They're about the *un*belief and *failure* of most Jewish people to respond to the gospel.

And the question is, why does Paul go into so much detail about it?

Well, in an age when anti-semitism is rising, the first thing to say is, this is not anti-semitism. Look at chapter 10:1 from today's reading, where Paul - who's Jewish - writes, 'Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.' And look back at chapter 9:2-3, 'I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accused and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen.'

So what Paul writes in these three chapters doesn't flow out of some kind of visceral hatred of Jewish people, but from his love for his own - that they too would turn to Christ.

But again, why spend so much time on that? Well, recently, Su and I had to change our car, and we went into one dealer because they had a car we were interested in, and the salesman went, 'nah, you don't want to buy that, I wouldn't buy that, what you want is this more expensive one' - which we could not afford. But then we went into another dealer, with a different car, which was in our price range, and he said, 'oh this car is amazing. I love this car!'

Who would you buy from? The one who doesn't believe in what he's selling, or the one who does?

And Paul goes into the detail he does because, if Christ is so amazing, if the gospel is so good, why don't the Jewish people believe in it? Why haven't the very people from whom and for whom Christ came converted *en masse*? I mean, if they haven't bought into it, why should we?

And as Mike showed last week, in the first part of chapter 9 Paul answers that with God's election - that who does or does not respond to the gospel is down to God's choosing of those who *do* respond. That v18, 'he has mercy on whomever he wills.' That rather than everyone getting what they deserve, separation and condemnation from him, he chooses some to receive mercy.

But that raises another question, doesn't it? Which Paul pre-empts in today's passage: v19, 'You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"'

I mean, if God predestines and elects some people for salvation and passes over everyone else, if he chooses some to experience his mercy but hardens others by giving them the life they want apart from him, then how can he blame people for not repenting and believing when he doesn't give them the faith to repent and believe?

And in answering that, Paul addresses three issues as relevant now as back then: firstly, who are we to question God? Secondly, what happens when what you think makes you right with God does the opposite; and thirdly, why faith is the answer.

The Problem of Questioning God

Parents, how much do you like it when your kids answer you back? I mean that is cause for the board of discipline to be applied to the seat of learning. Or if you're a professional, or just know a lot about your subject, how much do you like people questioning you, or talking down at you, like you don't have a clue what you're talking about?

And in answering this question about whether God is right or not to find fault with those who don't believe, when believing is down to his sovereign choice, Paul's not dismissing the person with genuine and honest questions. He's critiquing people who think they can tell God how to run the universe.

And he does so by reminding us of three things: our identity; God's character; and what the Bible teaches.

Firstly, our identity.

Verse 20, 'Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?' In other words, 'Hey, remember you're a creature, not the Creator. And is your idea of God really so small that you think you're his equal or his better, and he should answer to you?'

I mean, imagine a private in the army barging into the office of the Chief of Staff to tell him what to do. Or imagine you took a pottery lesson and took your lump of clay and made this nice little bowl, only for that bowl to start telling you that actually he wants to be a porcelain vase, and not just that but 'this is how you should use your kitchen appliances and spend your money and raise your kids.' What would you say? 'Bowl, you're just a bowl! I made you, you didn't make me.'

Because that's the image Paul uses here: Verse 20-21, 'Will what is molded say to it's 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 honourable use and another for dishonourable use?' In other words, humanity in general, and the people of Israel in particular, are clay in the hands of the master craftsmen and we answer to him not him to us.

But that doesn't just apply to God's purposes in predestination and election, does it? It's also about how we respond when we read something in God's word that we chafe against: like he says 'don't do that', but we want to; or when he allows something to happen to us that we *don't* want, or he doesn't give us something we *do* want.

And Paul is saying, could it be that God knows something you don't? That he might have some good purpose in saying 'no' to *this* thing, or allowing *that* thing, that at the moment you know nothing about? Might his wisdom be greater than yours?

In other words, when there are things you don't understand, do you respond with humility, as one created, or in pride as one who thinks he knows better than God?

But secondly, Paul says the reason God's not at fault in finding fault with those who don't believe, is his character. Verses 22-23: '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?'

Did you see the repetition? *Desiring to show his wrath; making known his power; making known the riches of his glory*.

So the way God works through predestination and election is about putting his character on display: his wrath - his implacable opposition to sin; his power - to save all whom he chooses and punish all who refuse him; and his glory in his mercy to people who don't deserve it.

I mean, if God only displayed his justice, and simply gave everyone what they deserve, then no-one would be saved and we'd know nothing of his mercy. But likewise, if he only showed his mercy, and saved everyone, then we'd know nothing of his wrath against *in*justice.

And so in God choosing some and leaving others to their own choice; in God giving some what they *don't* deserve, his mercy, and others what they *do* deserve, his justice, he puts the glory of his character on public display.

But maybe you react to that by saying, 'well I disagree, personally, I think God should be a God of love and mercy to all.' But that's Paul's point, isn't it? 'Yes, but you're not God. And who are you to tell God what he should do? Your God is still much too small,' Paul would say.

But again, that doesn't just have to do with the Jewish people believing or not believing, does it? It's to do with any time you might find yourself chafing against the sovereignty of God, or the mercy of God or the wrath of God - when things in your life, or the wider world, are not going the way you think they should. When bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people.

And when you find yourself questioning that, or even resenting it, ask yourself: what God am I worshipping? Is my God simply an extension of my preferences, a god of my own imagination, or the God who is there? Because if your god is made in your image, rather than you in his, then it has no power to change you, no power to confront you, no power to lift you up when you fall down, or see you through the storm when life is raging. It will be as week and needy, or as proud and prejudiced as you are.

Instead, it's when we see God as he really is: the God of mercy and justice that we have a God worthy of worship. And it's only that God who can humble us when we're proud and heal us when we're broken.

But also, look at how Paul describes the vessels of wrath and the vessels of mercy. Verse 22: 'What if God… has endured with much patience vessels of wrath *prepared for destruction*…' and v23, the 'vessels of mercy, which *he has prepared* beforehand for glory.'

Because you might say, 'yeh but even if it does display his glory, it's still not right that God creates people for damnation.' But that's not what Paul's saying, is it? For those who receive his mercy it's crystal clear who does the preparing for glory: it's God. Because, if you're a Christian, it's God who choose you and saved you, and poured his mercy upon you.

But for those heading for wrath, Paul's language is different. He just says 'they're prepared for destruction' - and he doesn't tell us by whom. And the implication is, they've prepared themselves. Because right back in chapter 1 Paul spoke of the wrath of God being poured out on ungodliness and how does that happen? By God giving people up - verses 24, 26, 28 - to what they want. And in chapter 2:5 he writes, 'Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath.' So who does the storing up of wrath? The preparing for destruction? The person themselves. And if someone chooses to continue walking away from God, it's as if God says, well if that's what you want you can have it.

But the third reason Paul gives for why loads of Gentiles are responding the gospel but relatively few Jews, it that that's exactly what the Bible said would happen.

And he begins with the extraordinary response of the gentiles to Christ, because who would have predicted that!? Answer: God did. And he quotes two passages from the prophet Hosea. Verses 25-26, 'As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

And Paul is saying, what in Hosea's day referred to the people of Israel who had turned against God but were brought back to him, is now being fulfilled in the coming in of the gentiles to the one true people of God. Becasue once they were not part of his people, but now, in Christ, they are. Verse 24, 'Even us, whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles.'

So why should we not be surprised by the nations turning to Christ? Because God's always had a habit of showing mercy to those who don't deserve it, of choosing those who were not his and making them his.

But likewise, ethnic Israel has also had a habit of rejecting God's messengers and purposes with only a fraction, a remnant staying faithful. And to make that case, he quotes two passages from Isaiah. Verses 27-29: 'And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."'

So far from the small number of Jewish people who were responding to Jesus being a reason to doubt God's word, or reject the gospel, Paul is saying it's the opposite, because all along God said that's exactly what would happen.

But notice what Paul's basing his argument on. It's not his great intellect is it? It's not that faced with this thorny issue of predestination and election he says, 'well, let me tell you what I think.' So what does form the authority and determine how Paul sees things?

You see, when you've got doubts or questions, or you're wrestling with some moral or ethical issue, something or someone will be your authority, won't it. And it could be what your friends think, or what some influencer says. It could be some podcast you listen to, it could be your own great intellect. But for Paul it was the Bible. And if for you it's anything other than what God has revealed of himself, and his will and his ways, ultimately you're going to be selling yourself short.

So, is God wrong to find fault with those who refuse to believe the gospel? No. It's us who answer to God, not God to us. And through his mercy and his justice, his character is put on display; and after all, the prophets foretold that the nations would be brought in, and a remnant of Israel be saved.

Great, you might say, but if their refusal to believe is down to them, why do they refuse to believe? Well, that's Paul's next point.

The Problem of Self-Righteousness
Verses 30-31: 'What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; *but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law*.'

Now, to say that the gentile people of Paul's day did not pursue righteousness is an understatement, isn't it? I mean if you wanted an orgy, or a tavern to get trolleyed in, you did not have to look far. Whereas, in contrast, the Jewish people stood out because of their righteousness and upstanding moral character.

And there lies the problem, Paul says. Because if you think you're already good enough and better than everyone else, you don't see yourself as someone in need of saving, do you? It's the problem of any deeply religious or moral person: that self-righteousness cuts you off from the grace and mercy of God, who saves those who know they cannot save themselves.

Look how Paul puts it: that in pursuing righteousness, they 'did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, *but as if it were based on works*' (v31-32). You see if you think your being accepted by God is down to your works, you being good enough, you've got to do one of two things, haven't you. You've either got to lower the bar to a standard you can and are achieving, or you've got to persuade yourself you're better than others.

And to do the first you'll concentrate on the easy stuff. So being righteous becomes going to synagogue or church or mosque. It means wearing the right kind of clothing and voting for the right kind of people. Or, as Jesus put it, it'll be about the externals while forgetting 'the weightier matters of the law' like loving God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself.

But to do the second - to persuade yourself that you're better than others, you'll need to criticise others and point out either how horrible they are or that they're not as zealous or as worthy as you are. And you only have to look at our current western culture to see how the secular person can be just as self-righteous as the religious person. How the left can do it just as much as the right.

And so Paul is saying there's a deep irony. By trying to be good and moral and righteous *on your own* does the exact opposite of what you're hoping. Rather than impressing God, and putting him in your debt, it cuts you off from him. Whereas the person who knows they're *not* good enough and can never *do* enough, is perfectly positioned to respond with faith and thankfulness to all that Christ has done for them.

You see, the ultimate failure of the Jewish people back then, or of religious or secular people today, is to fail to welcome the One the Law and the Prophets promised. Verses 32-33, 'They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."'

I mean, think: why is Jesus, his life and his death, and the gospel of God's grace to sinful people like you and me who don't deserve it, such a stumbling stone? And particularly for religious people?

Because the life of Jesus tells us there is One who did keep the whole law and who kept it perfectly - while in comparison we will never be good enough - and for the religious or moral person, that can assault their pride.

While the death of Jesus tells us, it's only his sacrifice, dying in our place for our sins, that's sufficient to save us. And for the religious person, intent on saving themselves, that's anything but good news.

Now if you're not yet a Christian, you might hear that and repeat the mantra that you've heard a million times, 'but surely it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you're sincere.' Oh, it matters greatly, Paul says. Verse 2, 'For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.' And Paul was a man who before he became a Christian he had so much zeal he persecuted the church. Because religious, ethnic, or moral zeal without true knowledge of God - breeds fanatics who seek to kill or cancel their opponents, then and now.

Verse 3, 'For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.'

The question is, is how can you submit to God and his righteousness and his way of doing things? Because if talking back to God, or thinking you can be good enough cuts you off from his mercy, how can you find his mercy?

The Answer of Faith

Verse 4, 'For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.' And the word for 'end' is the word *telos*: that all along Jesus was and is the goal, the point, the outcome the law was pointing to and preparing us for. And it's in him that the law was fulfilled. And it's by trusting in him that his righteousness is counted to us. As Paul quotes Isaiah in v33 - Jesus is either the stone we stumble over or the rock we build our lives on, for 'whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

But he's also the answer to those times when we're prone to question God or doubt his goodness. Because if God loves you so much he sent his Son to die for you, you can trust him when you don't have the answers to life's great questions. And you can worship him for his mercy and his justice because you know that though you have done nothing to deserve it, you have received his mercy. And when his word says things that run counter to our current culture, you can humble yourself before him because you know he is good.

So, Jew or gentile, secular or religious, the mercy of God is freely available to all. The question for all of us is - will you try and earn it yourself, or will you trust and thank Christ who has done it all for you?