

God holds onto His promise, and acts in accordance to His Sovereignty 《Ro 9:1-18》

Prelude: Some people say that we will surely see the fulfillment of our faith if we believe in the promise of God. There're also some who say God has absolute sovereignty and thus regardless of how pressing we are in our belief, nobody can change God's will if it is His purpose to fulfill it. Actually, these 2 sayings seem true, but they come from different angles; one focusses on God's promise, while the other one focusses on God's sovereignty. However, the most comprehensive understanding in this is to integrate both the promise of God and His sovereignty – ie, God will accomplish His promise, and He'll also act in accordance to His sovereignty. We cannot completely analyze this mystery with our rationale, but our heart can bear witness for us if we have understood this great mystery. Firstly, we ought to ask ourselves if our knowledge of this truth leads us into more earnest prayers and intercession? Also, can we see God's perfect will in the happenings that occur after our prayers? Try thinking: When Paul came to know the promise God has given to Israel, he had not given up praying for his own people and kin in his 20 years of faith, instead, he was utterly earnest in his intercessions. He did not receive a lot of optimistic evidences in the process of interceding for them because Israelites were so hardened, and they hated and persecuted him for the gospel he preached. However, Paul could not give up this interceding heart because of the promise given to Israel by God; instead, the pessimistic reality brought him into deeper anguish and sorrow when interceding, to the extent of willing to be cut off from Christ for the sake of their salvation. Is it compatible to our human logic? Certainly not! But this is the spirit of one who truly knows the promise of God. Paul's faith in the promise is not a kind of blind faith; rather, he understood what God was doing through the exponential increase in the hardening and stubbornness of Israel. Perhaps he had wrestled and argued with God, questioned God and deeply examined what God was doing, and from here, he clearly saw the faithfulness of God. God was not faithless, instead, He designed the salvation history with His infinite wisdom, and save the depraved mankind through His method that was not known to man – ie, through the hardening of Israel, God brought the gospel to the Gentiles. When He has finished saving His chosen people among the Gentiles, He will use this to shatter the pride of Israel and stir them to repentance, and thus turn to God. Herein, Paul had also deeply known God's revelation that was utterly mysterious, that is not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Hence, God has never abandoned His chosen people; neither does He change His redemption plan in view of the hardening of men. In contrary, God accomplishes more beautiful things. It may be difficult for us to comprehend such work of God because of the length of salvation history. As human, we only live for 70-80 years, and in such transient lifetime, we have a lot of realistic woes and burden (eg: illness, financial crisis, family salvation, dilemma in marriage, blessedness of children etc). As we think of these real problems, our first mentality is, "Lord, we do not have 2000 years to wait for the beautiful ending". Besides, concerning the realities that we face, sometimes we just hope that God could work faster and solve the problems as soon as possible, and that our future can be secured. Often, God's ideal is not something that can be easily sensed by our humanity, and this is also the reason why we continue to wrestle with God. Try asking: God has designed a salvation plan of 2000 years so meticulously, is He not trying to tell us that we do not have to worry for our personal problems that seem very real? Is He not trying to tell us that personal, family, region, and world gospelization are destined, and all we need to do is to firmly believe in God's promise and accomplish the mission the Lord has entrusted to us, in order to see God's fulfillment? If Paul's intercession could bring forth the repentance and salvation of the most hardened Israelites before the history ends, should we not also be like him as we intercede for our kin and the unsaved people? Therefore, lets not be disheartened. Instead, look upon the author and perfecter of our faith Lord Jesus, and run the race marked out for us.

1. We need to listen to the voices from our conscience that is convicted by God's Spirit 《9:1-5》

1) Voice of conscience that is generated from relationships 《9:3》

* Actually, becoming Christian is not cutting off our ties with our family or nation. Instead, becoming a Christian brings our relationship with kin to a more genuine and deeper level, that is, not only do we pay attention to their physical needs, we all the more care about their eternal souls. For this reason, it is inherent in us to have a heart that ceaselessly prays for our family, and this heart does not need any return or trigger. If such is the state of our hearts, this shows that our spirit is completely compatible with the promise of family gospelization that God has given us. Hence, do not remain in "I do not have such determination" and be accused; do not have the wrong assumption of "I have done my duty but my family still remain in disbelief and hardened". As long as they are still alive, there remains the need for us to pray for the salvation of their souls, and we ought to explore more in it. Besides, we need to confirm the relationships that God has established for us through time (eg: previous background in church, crowd we used to be in contact with etc) and seek to intercede according to the voice of conscience. Actually, we shall not give in to our difficulties but listen more to the voice of conscience given by the Holy Spirit so that we can be brought to Lord's heart more clearly.

2) Voice of conscience that is generated from the background of God's Promise 《9:4-5》

* Paul was born as a Jew and was very clear of the status and covenant God had given to the Israelites. God did not only establish covenant with Abraham alone, rather, this covenant was renewed and extended to Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David. This covenant stood the test of time and was continuously reaffirmed by God; even when Israel was very weak, this covenant was not destroyed but in turn restored them, would God abandon it now that Israel was so weak? As Paul recalled the works that the faithful and kind God had done on Israel, he could not deny the truth of God's absolute love to Israel. Hence, there is also background to our intercession for a person or a tribe. Similarly, we may have witnessed the blessed work of God in a person, family or denomination, or a tribe. Although they may be very weak in the process, we cannot eliminate the voice of our conscience that presses us to intercede for them. Blessed are those who can hear this voice!

3) Voice of conscience that is generated from God's faithfulness 《9:5》

* Here, Paul praised God who is above all and forever praised. It can be inferred that although he could not see anything in Israel's current condition, he still put his trust solely on the God who accomplishes all things. This God works in accordance to His faithful nature, His plan is higher than man's, His heart is greater than the most generous man. Hence, despite nothing optimistic can be seen from Israelites, Paul still put his trust and hope in this faithful God. Actually, at times as we see no signs of blessedness from man or how unadorable they are, all the more we cannot put our eyes on man. Instead, at that moment, we need to put our trust on Lord who accomplishes all things because despite man can err, God never. Man can see wrongly, but God will absolutely not. The consistent work of God has His accurate decision in it. If God has shown us favour, He will treat us with mercy to the end, what's more for a family or tribe? Hence, we need to put down the prejudice or narrow thoughts we have towards others, learn to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit from God's faithfulness. Now we confirm "relationship", "background of promise", "God's faithfulness" are the foundation from which we can hear the voice of our conscience and intercede for people.

2. In the matter of saving the Israelites, God's word has never failed 《Ro 9:6-13》

1) For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel, neither because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all God's children

*Here, it is pointing to the "Israel origin", Israel is not to be generalized as all gentiles. The bible talks about God's redemption plan on Israel and its purpose is to reveal His glorious predestination. One mystery here is that, among the seeds of Abraham, only the one chosen by God who experiences the supernatural and divine intervention of God, and having believed and transformed in the spirit, is true Israel. Thus, this is like God telling Paul, "Do not only focus on the whole tribe, pay attention to those who truly belongs to me in this tribe". This is not a totally new concept because Abraham's descendants (Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esau) had revealed this. Only those born through God's promise are considered unnatural birth, and born from God. Therefore, God only revealed to Abraham only after he had exhausted all means and abilities to conceive, promised him the son that was to come through him. Today, such is also how a person becomes a Christian. It's through the supernatural work of the Spirit who executes salvation on him, cause him to born again and transform. This new person thus belongs to God; it contains no human ideas within. This shows that God acts according to His promise, neither ferventness of men nor any good conditions were required before He executes His election. Therefore, today, God also wants us to pray according to the promise (4 gospelization), and in all things that we encounter, design our lives according to this unchanging truth and complete the mission that Lord entrusts to us.

2) God's election is not by works but by Him who calls

* We human easily dwell on man's background and their works. In particular, qualified background origin shows the innate superiority; qualified works show man's acquired superiority, yet neither is in God's chosen categories. Hence, when Paul gave the examples of Isaac and Ishmael, he worried that Israelites would put their focus on the background of origin (thus see Ishmael as not qualified because his mother was Hagar). Hence, he gave another example of same parents, ie Jacob and Esau. Both of them shared the same biological parents, and genetically speaking, they were twins (the most similar innate conditions). But both were chosen while in mother's womb (before having done any good or evil). Not only the origin of a person, here it especially emphasized that the works of man is useless in this matter of God's election. If we take a closer look at Esau and Jacob's life after birth, we will realize that the initial virtue and works of Jacob were absolutely below his brother's. Jacob's name means "he grasps the heel", because since young, he liked to grasp blessings through lies, and that was how he got his brother's birth right. Although this is not pleasing to the righteous God, because of God's election, we indeed see that Jacob had a disposition that desire to receive God's promise. Esau received the favour of his father in various aspects, but he was indeed one who undermined God's promise. In this aspect, we see how God's election surpasses the works of men, to the extent of being illogical. This shows that how great a mystery it is for a person to be loved by God and to receive salvation.

3) The bible's main intention of emphasizing the example of Isaac and Jacob

* Through these 2 examples, God wants people to come to realize that they cannot explain God's election with any reasoning or postulation, because this is from God's sovereignty. Also, God also wants to bring man to a stage in which they can never boast because redemption comes from God's grace and compassion. Hence, as our spirit come to understand this, we cannot argue with God saying, "God, why do you not save certain people who appear to have qualified conditions (eg background and works)?" neither can we say, "Lord, why do you choose such a disqualified person (eg Gentiles or people with humble conditions)?" After Paul understood this, he no longer treated Israelites as special, instead, he was in awe of God's plan for Israelites in Israel. Today, some people see Jews as a special tribe, thinking that they are especially clever or driven when in fact, they are all similar when being placed on the page of salvation. To put it in another angle, they reject God's grace (Christ) because of their good conditions, and thus on a certain level, they are all the more hardened. Hence, to those who have slightly better conditions in background and works (maybe family, education, character, reputation etc), we need to be even more humble and acknowledge the grace that God gives us; bear compassion to the weaker people beside us and live out the spirit of loving God and men.

3. God will have mercy on whom He has mercy, and will have compassion on whom He has compassion 《9:14-18》

1) The just God is also the God who takes the initiative to show mercy and compassion

* Mercy means man does not receive the punishment he rightfully deserves, grace means man receive rewards he does not deserve. From our level, we may think that a fair God is one who punishes and rewards according to what man has done. But in God's definition of fairness, no one can attain the passing mark. Therefore, God needs to proactively executes His right to show mercy and compassion. Man may use their standard of good vs evil to gauge God's rights and feel that certain ways of God are not fair (in particular election). But from another angle, if the all-knowing and almighty God executes salvation from man's standard of fairness, then God is utterly unjust and He fails, because He leaves His rights to us who are limited and subjective. Hence, the fair God needs to execute His election with His disposition that is completely kind and fair, and this election is not only now but eternal. We can use another example, that is a father who is full of righteousness and love will never entrust the authority to manage the household to his child, he will manage even better and to the end. Similarly, the fair and responsible God will also execute His election with His disposition and sovereignty. When God elects, He is not facing everyone who is on the qualifying mark so that He can choose the more outstanding one. Instead, everyone has completely missed the mark for all man have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Hence, to the loving God, His fairest method is to take initiative to show mercy and compassion, so that the people who deserve death can be saved.

2) For a man to be justified by faith, it depends not on man who wills nor he who runs, but on God who shows mercy

* Man's will is his resoluteness and determination, he who runs shows the hard work. Here, the bible clearly states that for a man to be saved, it depends not on these 2 attributes in man but on God who shows mercy. Hence, to fallen people like us, God still has to show mercy on us first before will and hardwork can be produced from our hearts. From here, we know that God's redemption has no human's choice in it. But in it, there's God's mercy, and the absolute element of irresistible grace. In the matter of salvation, man cannot say that he has chosen to believe in the gospel because it is the God who shows mercy working in his soul. The outward decision to believe is the evidence of God showing mercy on him, not the reason why he is saved. To us who believe, naturally, our hearts are conscious of God's mercy; in weakness, we will never be brought to a state of "choose not to believe", because salvation does not come from self. For the same reason, when we look at a person who is hardened and does not believe, uncontrollably, our first prayer will be, "Lord, has mercy on him", and this is also one of the main channels through which Holy Spirit intercedes for others through us.

3) To those who are hardened and remain in disbelief, God is not to be blamed

* When we read about how God revealed that He will harden Pharaoh's heart, a lot of people may have doubts immediately and question if God is unjust. But in this scripture, we need to know that King Pharaoh was not a person who was kind and passed the mark, neither it was because he was not chosen that God hardened him. Actually, the nature of his life was already hardened. A theologian once said, "unless man hardens himself first, for God will never cause man to be hardened". Indeed, it was Pharaoh who hardened his heart to God and reject humility. Although he yielded to Moses's request temporarily when Egypt suffered disasters and allowed the Israelites to leave, he changed his mind soon after.

Such repetition tells us that his heart was hardened towards God to the end. Hence, when the bible said "God hardened Pharaoh's heart", it means: ① God let him be hardened, because he was hardened since the beginning; ② His hardening was the evidence why God judged him because he had no reverence towards God, thus he received the destiny of being given over to his depravation to the extent of being destroyed eternally. Indeed, there's spiritual reasoning behind the depravation and destruction of man, but when Lord revealed this truth to us, He meant to let us understand: ① Through those who cannot believe, God wants the elect to know how great is His mercy and compassion so that we can be in awe of His grace the whole life and eternally; ② God retains the people who do not believe, to the extent of giving over to the great power. But in this there is the higher plan of God - to reveal the great power and wisdom of God eventually when they are destroyed. Therefore, to us who are chosen by God, we must not let these people become the object of envy; instead, we ought to be the salt and light for Lord in this disbelieving world, save and bless all people through our lives which are blessed and loved, and giving all glory to God.