

Living under God's Mercy

Key Verse:
*“Therefore hath he
mercy on whom he
will have mercy,
and whom he will
he hardeneth.”*
—Romans 9:18

Selected Scripture:
Romans 9:6-18

IN THE EARLIER CHAPTERS of Paul's epistle to the Romans he explains in detail how Israel failed to keep the Law as they had promised they would. (Rom. 3:20; Exod. 19:5-8) Justification, or righteousness, Paul further says, comes only by God's "grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:24) In verse 28 he adds, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." This transition from the Mosaic Law into God's grace through Christ was difficult for many early Jewish Christians to accept.

Some have interpreted the verses of our lesson to teach that God has permanently rejected Israel in favor of the followers of Christ. However, this "replacement" idea is not at all what Paul was preaching. Our Key Verse is not a rejection of Israel, but it is a statement which shows that the Almighty has favors to dispense. It is a matter purely of his own business to whom he shall give them. God gave natural Israel certain favors and privileges as a nation that carried a corresponding blessing, but they rejected him time and time again. The Lord would in no sense of the word be obligated to continue his preferential blessings to them, and to ignore others no less

worthy. Accordingly, Paul says it would be entirely proper for God to discontinue his special favors to those who would not use them, and to give them to others.

To make his point, Paul turns to Israel's history. He says, "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed." (Rom. 9:6-8) God's promise concerning the natural seed of Abraham came to fruition because of the miraculous birth of Isaac, who alone was Abraham's child by promise.

Paul also speaks of Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac, saying, "For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth." (vs. 11) Here, Paul makes Jacob and Esau a picture of two classes. Esau was the firstborn. He was successful, but worldly minded, aptly picturing natural Israel. Jacob was the younger. He was not perfect, but had more interest in the promises given to his family, and fitly pictures the church—spiritual Israel. God's choice of Esau to be a picture of natural Israel was nothing to his disadvantage. Indeed, the nation of Israel was given the "oracles of God" and the first opportunity to recognize and embrace the Messiah when he came to them.—Rom. 3:1,2; Gal. 3:21-24

The mention of Pharaoh's heart being hardened would also have resonated with Paul's Jewish audience. (Rom. 9:17) Pharaoh was allowed to harden his own heart by thinking he was above the plagues, not because God forced him to act as he did. In verse 21, we are reminded that "the potter"—God—has "power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour"—that is, less honor. In summary, our Key Verse does not indicate that we forfeit our free will, but reminds us that God's ways are higher than our ways.—Isa. 55:9 ■