

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!**

#### **The Amazing Grace of a Sovereign God**

Study #16

(Romans 9:1-29)

#### **Pre-Introduction:** A *preliminary* throat-clearing...

Because of the style of preaching to which I am committed (“exposition”), you can be assured that, over time, you and I will cover all biblical themes. That includes my personal hobby horses as well as those topics that I might more naturally avoid or might not think to speak about.

By moving through a book (as we are doing with Romans) passage by passage, we focus on what is before us when we come to this or that text, thereby gaining exposure to *“the whole counsel of God.”* (Acts 20:27)

This morning, we come to a passage that addresses a challenging theme. And here at the outset I want to admit to the obvious: I won’t answer all questions that this passage may raise. The message for today may even generate more questions than answers, especially if you have not given much thought to the themes of Romans 9. Still, of course, I hope that our time in the Word today will be helpful and that it will guide you into truth and worship.

Often our difficulty with a passage is directly related to our need for it. So, we’ll jump in with both feet, eager for what the Spirit has to say through the Word!

I do invite any of you who would like to dialogue about today’s topic and passage to feel free to speak with me afterwards today, or call me to talk. I’d be happy to sit down with you and explore what the Bible is saying.

#### **Introduction:** Now, about the Jews...

The three chapters of Romans 9, 10, and 11 are often referred to as “parenthetical” chapters - and for good reason. Had Paul moved directly from Romans 8:39 to 12:1, many of us probably would not have felt that he had left anything out!

However, most of those in Paul’s original audience would have noticed! And as we delve deeply into this parenthesis it will become increasingly clear that, far from being an irrelevant aside, these chapters are indispensable to the book of Romans as a whole.

Romans is about God’s work in the world and especially with the work accomplished by Jesus.

The three chapters we’ll be studying for the next three weeks address God’s dealings with the people who get the most attention back in the Old Testament and the people who famously rejected Jesus: the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

With his opening words Paul does as much to open a window into his soul as he does anywhere in his writings.

#### **ISRAEL - God’s Plan for His Chosen People (vv. 1-5)**

##### **Longing for Israel’s Salvation (vv. 1-3)**

*[1] I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, [2] that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. [3] For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh*

You can’t read those words and not sense Paul’s heartache. Here is no cold, distant theologian writing from an ivory tower about theoretical niceties.

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<sup>1</sup> Some have suggested that the makeup of the church at Rome was largely Jewish, and that the “Jewish question” answered by these chapters was prompted by the members of the church. Maybe, but we don’t know that to be the case.

No, this is Paul speaking from the gut. He is writing as a Jew about his fellow Jews - and he wants us to know that it deeply grieves him that they have, for the most part, rejected Jesus. They have refused to believe that He is the Lord, the Christ, the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

The contrast with what he's just been talking about couldn't be clearer. Romans 8:31-39 was the peak of joy and triumph. Chapter 9 is the valley of deep emotional pain.

He's so upset about it that he would wish himself "anathema"<sup>3</sup> (cursed; unsaved) if by that his kinsmen could be saved.<sup>4</sup>

Listen as Paul describes the amazing blessings his kinsmen have received from God.

### Recounting Israel's Blessings (vv. 4-5)

*[4] who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, [5] whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.*

There is no question that God blessed the Jewish people, from Abraham forward. They were redeemed from Egyptian bondage and adopted as His people at the Exodus. As well, God made a series of covenants with them. Specifically:

- The Abrahamic Covenant, a unilateral covenant guaranteeing that blessing would come to Abraham and his descendants.<sup>5</sup>
- The Mosaic Covenant (The Law of Moses) which obligated the Jews to live like the people of God they were.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Paul had a deep love and affection for people outside of Judaism - Gentiles like us. But he had an even greater passion for his fellow countrymen.

<sup>3</sup> "Anathema" is a word used to describe anything that was destined to be destroyed.

<sup>4</sup> Paul writes (with some irony) of his own separation from Christ after having just written that such a separation is impossible. In chapter 8 he made it clear that a person who has been saved/adopted/redeemed/justified by God can never be cursed. The children of God are secure.

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 12, 15, 18, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20ff.

- The Davidic Covenant, which promised that from David's descendants would come the Messiah, the king of Israel who would reign forever.<sup>7</sup>
- The New Covenant, which looked forward to a time when God would pour out His Spirit, forgiving sin, and entering into a deep relationship with His people.<sup>8</sup>

On top of all that, the Jews also were given the sacrificial system by which they could find forgiveness, the priesthood to stand before God, and many other blessings that no other people on earth had received.

They even looked forward to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords AND the Savior - Jesus is identified as "**God blessed forever!**" coming from their own nation!

But, as we tally up all of these great blessings, Paul has presented a situation that presents us, thoughtful readers that we are, with a problem.

Here we sit, two thousand years after Christ's life, wondering at the mostly non-involvement of the Jews with the Jesus movement.

If, in the preaching of the Gospel, the message went "**to the Jew first**" (as Paul says, 1:16), then why has the Jew shared so little in the salvation Christ has to offer?

How could it be that the nation which had been specially prepared by God for this time of fulfillment, should have failed to recognize the Messiah when He came?<sup>9</sup>

Actually, it looks for all the world as if God blew it. He devised a plan for salvation that His own chosen people missed. What poor planning!

<sup>7</sup> 2 Samuel 7.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 31. We are presently enjoying the "first fruits" of the New Covenant. It was ushered in on the night before Jesus died when He said at the Passover meal, **[Luke 22:20 "This cup... is the New Covenant in My blood."**

<sup>9</sup> How could it be that the Gospel, which Paul said was first proclaimed in the Old Testament (**[1:2] promised beforehand through God's prophets in the Holy Scriptures**) be the fulfillment of God's promise if it was refused by the vast majority of the Jewish people?

It is with the thought that God's word and His purpose have somehow failed in the back of our minds that we keep reading.

### SOVEREIGNTY - the Flavor of God's Reign (vv. 6-29)<sup>10</sup>

#### The Purposes of God Will Stand (vv. 6-13)

*Look at Ishmael and Isaac (vv. 6-9)*

*[6] But it is not as though the word of God has failed. (See, this is what Paul thought we would think.) For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; [7] nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." [8] That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. [9] For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON."*

These verses bring to our minds God's promise that Abraham's descendants would be blessed through one of his sons. God didn't choose all of his sons. Just one: Isaac.

Along the way Abraham fathered other sons, including Ishmael, the son of Sarah's maid, Hagar. But Ishmael was not the one who received the promise of the Abrahamic covenant. It was Isaac.

Well, sure. That just makes sense.

*"Of course God chose Isaac for blessing. After all, he was the son of the legitimate wife, Sarah. He could not have chosen Ishmael, because Ishmael was the son of the bondwoman."*

Good reasoning. But let's be careful.

It is NOT that God blessed Isaac and not Ishmael because Abraham committed adultery with Hagar. God's choice was not based on the human merit - or lack of same - of either the sons or the parents.

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<sup>10</sup> What Paul clearly shows here in verses 6-9 is that, from the very beginning, God has been choosing some to enjoy the benefits of the promises He has made.

Lest we think that human merit has a part to play in God's choice, Paul adds another *for instance*, inviting us to consider the case of Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau.<sup>11</sup>

*Look at Jacob and Esau (vv. 10-13)*

*[10] And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; [11] for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, [12] it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."<sup>12</sup>*

Here it is obvious that God's choice had nothing to do with the merits of special lineage or of Jacob's or Esau's individual traits or works.

In fact, the choice of Jacob over Esau was contrary to the ancient custom of blessing the first-born. God chose to NOT bless the first-born but to bless the second, instead.<sup>13</sup>

Now, any Jew reading all of this would have no problem accepting Paul's reasoning.

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that neither as they occur in Genesis nor as they are used by Paul do these words refer to the eternal destinies either of the two persons or of the individual members of the nations that have sprung up from them. Rather, the reference is to the future national histories.

<sup>12</sup> As if we might be able to conjure up a reason for determining why, from the womb, God chose that the promise would pass through Jacob and not Esau, Paul highlights that it was before they were even born, and before there was any guilt for sins that they committed.

<sup>13</sup> Some have stumbled over Paul's use of words in verse 13 when he speaks of "*love*" and "*hate*." Consider this... Some believe that Paul is affirming that God emotionally loved Jacob and emotionally hated Esau. I don't think so. The words (quoting Malachi 1:2) "*love*" and "*hate*" here do not speak of God's emotional response to either Jacob or Esau, but with the choice of the one over the other. "*Hate*" should not be read as an opposite of "*love*" in the emotional sense, but as a synonym for rejection. Paul is affirming that God chose Jacob and his descendants for special blessing and that He left Esau (and, more particularly, the nation of Edom) outside of that blessing relationship.

He can say - and the Jews would all say, “*Amen*” - that all those descended from Abraham are NOT necessarily God’s children. Only those coming through Isaac and Jacob were.

But Paul also says (v. 6) that not even all of the descendants of Jacob are actually “Israel” - and all Jews would NOT necessarily “*AMEN*” that one!

Paul’s point here is that those who are “*Israel indeed*” have always been those whom God has chosen.

Now, the most natural response to Paul’s thought here on God’s sovereign choice is that it seems to make God appear unfair since He chooses one person (Isaac, Jacob) and not the other (Ishmael, Esau).

Paul anticipated that objection.

#### **The Justice of God is Sure (vv. 14-18)**

*There is no injustice with God (v. 14)*

***[14] What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!***

God has absolute freedom of choice.

You and I talk glibly about our freedoms and our choices and our liberties. We have the right to vote and freedom of speech and assembly and the right to pursue happiness.

Sure. Within certain parameters we do enjoy those freedoms. But, all of our freedoms are limited and derived and “iffy” (we can lose them) freedoms.

There is only Person in the universe who is free to do exactly as He pleases, and it’s not me and it’s not you.

If God exercises His freedom of choice by blessing Isaac or Jacob and doesn’t include Ishmael and Esau in the promised line, that choice doesn’t make Him unjust.

God simply has the right to make whatever choice He wants.

*God shows mercy as He chooses (v. 15)*

***[15] For He says to Moses, “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.”***

Notice. When Scripture is highlighting God’s freedom to choose, in what direction does it point? It doesn’t speak of God as a bully. It points to His mercy and to His compassion.

Which leads Paul to another comment.

*The critical factor is God’s mercy. Period. (v. 16)*

***[16] So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.***

To “get” what Paul is saying, try picturing someone running away from God as fast as they can. He or she is in willful rebellion against God.

The first three chapters of Romans tell us that this is, in fact, what all people are doing. We are all sinners. But our rebellion is not the determining factor in whether we end up being eternally lost or not.

The determining factor is God, because He can and does show mercy to rebels.

Now so far, Paul has considered some who were shown mercy in the past - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses.

He doesn’t show mercy to all, though. And we are next introduced to someone who was NOT shown mercy.

*Exhibit A: Pharaoh (v. 17)*

***[17] For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.”***

These words take us back to the time of the Exodus, when God brought His people out of Egypt.

After four hundred years of slavery, the people of Israel needed deliverance and God was prepared to deliver. Moses, the deliverer, was in place. The only obstacle standing in the way of God's people leaving was an obstinate Pharaoh.

From the outset, the Egyptian ruler would neither cooperate with God's plan nor submit to God's power. He refused to worship God or to allow the Jews to worship God.

In the recounting of the Exodus story, we are told several times that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.<sup>14</sup>

But, sometime soon, sit down and read the story carefully. You will find that God hardened an already very hard heart. (Exodus 5-14)

Please don't think for a minute that Pharaoh was really open to believing in God, or that he was right on the brink of obeying God - and then God turned him from trust to rebellion! Nothing could be further from the reality of what actually happened.

Remember. All the way back in Romans 1 we saw how God dealt with people who "**suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness**" and who refuse to respond to the revelation God has given of Himself in creation.

God "**gives them over.**" In other words, He simply frees them up to do what they would do if left on their own - which is to rebel and to reject Him.

Paul offers the Egyptian Pharaoh as Exhibit A of those who resist God AND of what God reserves the right to do with them (a prefiguring of disobedient Israel which is now opposed to the Gospel).

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<sup>14</sup> The story starts out with Pharaoh's heart hardened against Moses' request. (Exodus 5). Then, it is confirmed that his heart was hardened. This observation is made several times, with no mention of God's hardening work (7:13; 7:22; 8:15; 8:19; 8:32; 9:7). Then, well into the story, we read that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart. (9:12) Then, Pharaoh again hardened his own heart. (9:34) God confirms that He has hardened Pharaoh's heart. (10:1; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10; 14:4)

He confirms them in their hardness. He hardens them IN their rebellion.

The result of Pharaoh's hardening was that he became a witness - albeit an accidental witness - to the power of God as he provided the opposition to the great deliverance of God's people.<sup>15</sup>

There is no question. God acts according to His own sovereign and merciful plan.

***[18] So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.***<sup>16</sup>

That is obviously true. But it raises another question.

If God hardens some people's hearts (hearts that are, admittedly already hardened against Him, like Pharaoh's heart was) how can He judge them as hardened sinners since no one can resist His sovereign will?

### **The Grace of God is AMAZING! (vv. 19-29)**

*Anticipating a challenge (v. 19)*

***[19] You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"***

The point of the verse, of course, is not that it is a hard thing to resist God's will. The point is that nobody can resist His will. And, if nobody can resist His will, on what basis does God judge men and women to be guilty sinners?

Well, Paul has an answer to that question. And we'll get to the answer, which will highlight God's amazing, surprising grace.

But, he starts off by asking a very personal, pointed question.

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<sup>15</sup> See Ex. 15:14ff; Joshua 2:10ff; 9:9; 1 Sam. 4:8 for the profound effect produced on other nations by the news of the Exodus.

<sup>16</sup> This is the way it has to be. If God was compelled to be merciful by some cause outside of Himself, not only would His mercy be so much the less mercy, He Himself would also be so much the less God.

*A pointed response (vv. 20-21)*

**[20] On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? [21] Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?<sup>17</sup>**

Once again we are brought back to the first law of the universe: There is a God, and it is not me. We are the created; He is the Creator.

He is free to do as He wills.<sup>18</sup>

Suppose we answer Paul, “*But people aren’t pots. Can’t we bring our honest questions to God?*”

Of course! Paul would tell us that God does permit - He even welcomes - our questions.

But He won’t submit to our interrogation. He won’t be cross-examined as if He is on trial. We can’t come to God in a spirit of pushy demandingness.<sup>19</sup>

God is not answerable to us for what He does or for how He does what He does.

Ultimately, just as the potter is responsible for the vessel he makes, so God is finally responsible for what He does in human history.

And what is He doing in history? Watch as Paul pulls back the curtains so that we can see something of His overall plan.

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<sup>17</sup> See 2 Tim. 2:20, where vessels are made of various materials, and those which are to “dishonor” are simply designed for less noble or ornamental, but not necessarily less useful, purposes. At any rate, the potter does not normally create a pot just to destroy it. The illustration comes from Jeremiah 18:1-10.

<sup>18</sup> In order to fulfill the purpose of his craft, the potter must be free to make some vessels for noble use and some for menial use. His freedom is not the freedom of capriciousness, but the freedom to accomplish his purposes as he sees fit.

<sup>19</sup> See the book of Job (especially chapters 38-41) for God’s dealings with a man (Job) who questioned God’s justice and His actions.

*God’s purposes (vv. 22-23)*

**[22] What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? [23] And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory**

We need to hear the Apostle Paul clearly - and here is where our long study of Romans will come in handy.

I’m convinced that the thought is NOT that God has created some people for wrath, having pre-destined them for Hell.

The reality is that ALL “vessels” (i.e. - people) are objects of His wrath. We are all stuck in sin and unbelief and are therefore destined for destruction.<sup>20</sup>

God shows mercy to some of these “*vessels of wrath*” whom He persuades to believe and they thus become “*vessels of mercy.*”

Back in Romans 2:4, Paul said that God’s kindness is what leads people to repentance. I think that he is saying the same thing here.

He kindly leads some to repentance. There is a legitimate offer made to all, but He does not lead all to repentance.

If you’re struggling, maybe this will help.

Suppose Gordon Hartman (a noted San Antonio businessman and philanthropist) walked through those back doors right now and offered every person in this room \$1000.

OK, while you’re salivating, imagine that every one of us cursed Mr. Hartman out, spit in his face, refused his offer, and then went on living like frustrated paupers, complaining that we don’t have any money.

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<sup>20</sup> Verse 22 has all of humanity in view, which means that all are vessels of wrath because all have sinned (see Romans 3:23). In agreement with this are Sanday and Headlam, International Critical Commentary, and C.E.B. Cranfield, The New ICC. Even John Murray does not say dogmatically that Paul is teaching that God fore-ordained some to be vessels destined for wrath.

Could any of us fault Mr. Hartman if he decided that none of us would every receive any of his money? Of course not!

But what would we think of him if he came back to a few of us and implored us, even persuaded us, to take his money?

We might not understand what he was doing. We might even fault him for foolishness. But we wouldn't call him unjust for not choosing to persuade EVERYONE to receive his money?!

This is what Paul says that God is currently doing.

He has extended *some* mercy to *all* (by making a legitimate, universal offer and by dealing with all in patience, not exacting immediate punishment for sin), and He has extended *all* mercy to *some* (by persuading them to believe in Jesus).

And show mercy He does!

*God saves all kinds of people (24-29)*

God's mercy now extends to Gentiles (vv. 24-26)

*[25] As He says also in Hosea,*

***"I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE,' AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, 'BELOVED.'"***

***[26] AND IT SHALL BE THAT IN THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS SAID TO THEM, 'YOU ARE NOT MY PEOPLE,' THERE THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF THE LIVING GOD."***

The verses Paul is quoting are from the Old Testament prophet, Hosea, and he quotes them to show something amazing about God's grace.

God told Hosea that He planned to extend His mercy in the future to those Jews who were presently not experiencing mercy. God got His message across by means of an object lesson in Hosea's family life.

The Lord told Hosea to take a woman named Gomer<sup>21</sup> as his wife. He did, and she gave birth to a son. Hosea acknowledged the child as his own, and named him Jezreel.

But, he was convinced that her second and third children were not his, but had been fathered by another man. The names he gave those children expressed his anger at his wife's adultery.

He named one of them Lo-Ruhamah ("no natural affection"). The other he named Lo-Ammi ("no kin of mine"). Those are not very happy names for kids to have when they go out to play. But the names did clearly communicate that Hosea's wife had broken covenant with her husband.

The story of Hosea's home life was a living parable showing how Israel had broken covenant with God.

When Hosea wrote his prophecy, God was not blessing Israel because of her spiritual straying. But God assured Hosea that He would one day bless her.

There was a day coming when those Jews who, at present, were NOT His people would once more BE His people. The un-graced would one day be re-graced.

Now, what Paul does here in Romans 9 is to take this Old Testament parable (which referred to un-graced Jews being re-graced) and apply it to what God is now doing world-wide, with the Gentiles.

*[24] even us,<sup>22</sup> whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.*

Now, people like us (Gentiles) who were NOT God's people are becoming God's people through faith in Christ!

And, what's more, God will still show His mercy to His chosen people, Israel.

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<sup>21</sup> Gomer was a prostitute.

<sup>22</sup> Paul sees himself as a part of that remnant who had placed their trust in the Lord Jesus, and who functioned as the first fruits of a larger contingent of Jews who would turn to the Lord on some future day.

God's mercy still extends to the Jews (vv. 27-29)

**[27] And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED;**

**[28] "FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD ON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY.**

**[29] And just as Isaiah foretold,**

**"UNLESS THE LORD OF SABAOth HAD LEFT TO US A POSTERITY,**

**WE WOULD HAVE BECOME LIKE SODOM, AND WOULD HAVE RESEMBLED GOMORRAH."**

Yes, it's possible to read this statement as a heartless and cold account of how God will treat Israel. We could read it, "*ONLY a remnant will be saved*" or "*God is MERELY going to save a few Jews.*"

More reasonably, though, we should read, "*AT LEAST a remnant will be saved!*"

If God had not shown mercy to Israel, if He had simply "*given them over*" as He had every right to do, there would have been no remnant and His actions would have been completely justified.

The amazing thing is that even after they rejected Jesus, out of the rebel nation He still saved a remnant. God did not allow Israel to become like Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the days of Abraham, God allowed Sodom and Gomorrah to be utterly destroyed. We say, "*Yes, and they deserved it.*"

You bet that did - and so did Israel deserve it and so do we deserve it! But, God has chosen to be gracious and to show mercy, creating vessels of mercy out of vessels of wrath.

### Conclusion:

With no one twisting His arm, God sent His Son to the earth to offer Himself as a sacrifice to redeem humanity from the wreckage our sin had made. That is nothing but an act of grace, exercised by a sovereign God.

And today, God is calling YOU to trust His Son for eternal life. That invitation is motivated by nothing but sheer love. He wants to lavish His mercy on you.

And He promises that [*Romans 10:13*] *whoever calls on the Name of the Lord (Jesus!) will be saved* - and that is nothing but proof of his goodness.

Call on Him now and see that the Lord is good!

And if you have already called on Him, have tasted the salvation He offers, and know that He is good, great! Now praise Him - and tell those you know the glorious news of a God who loves them.