

God's Electing Choice

Romans 9:6-13

July 15, 2018

Introduction:

I never was terribly good at sports. In grade school, I was more of a scrawny kid than the athletic type, and although in any game we played out on the schoolyard I certainly gave it my all, I was never close to being one of the best. So when it came to that old childhood tradition of lining folks up to see who would be chosen for the team, I was always picked somewhere in the middle. I wasn't the worst, so that at least saved me from the shame of being one of "bottom of the barrel" kids that nobody wants on their team, but I sure wasn't a first round draft pick either. I guess I was just solidly okay: you could do a lot better than me, but you sure could do a heck of a lot worse.

I think there's a fair number of people who are still traumatized by the whole issue of being chosen or not chosen for teams in grade school. Perhaps you have some not-so-fond memories of repeatedly being chosen last or next to last. The entire process is like being put on a trial by a jury of your peers and the longer you languish in the pool of potential teammates, the more it shouts out to you, "I'm no good. Nobody wants me."

Perhaps that plays a role in people's general distaste for the doctrine of election. When we think of the idea of God choosing some to be saved, you might as well be rubbing your fingers across a chalkboard. We don't like the thought of God choosing some to be saved and not others. Such a notion might drag up those all schoolyard fears that remind you that you weren't chosen because you weren't good enough. I know that's not the only objection people have, but I imagine it plays a role. If God chooses me and not me who chooses him, then what does that say about the individual God doesn't choose? What's wrong with them that God didn't choose them to be saved? Even worse, what does it say about God? If God chooses some to be saved and not others, then isn't God being unfair? If he doesn't pick you to be on his team, how can he possibly blame us for batting for the other side?

Those are the difficult questions and heartfelt objections we're going to need to face both today and over the next few weeks because Paul is about to dive into the deep end of the theological pool. We're going to be spending the next few weeks thinking about election, about God's sovereign decision of whom he's going to save. We may not like it, but the Bible teaches it and so we need to come to grips with it, even if it makes us uncomfortable and raises questions and concerns in our minds. We have a responsibility to do our best to understand what Scripture teaches and to submit to it, but that means we also need to be honest about our concerns. I hope as we go through this I can clear up confusion while at the same time be sensitive to those of you who find this disconcerting and troubling. I know this doctrine is not easy and goes against the grain of how many of us understand how God operates. But I hope I can help you understand it, appreciate it, believe it, and most importantly, to find joy and delight in it because Paul wants us to view God's electing choice as something to rejoice in rather than something to be troubled by.

So to that end, please open your Bible with me to Romans 9. Our passage can be found on pg. 945 of the pew Bible if you're using one of those. We'll be giving our attention to v. 6-13 of Romans 9. Please follow along as I read. Paul writes, **"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. For this is what the promise said: 'About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.' And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls - she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"**

So let's get right into it and consider the first point, which I've put in the form of a question:

1. Has God's promises to Israel failed?

Last week we talked about Paul's deep concern for his fellow Jews who had rejected Christ. He said he had "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" and that if he could, he'd be accursed for the sake of his kinsmen. The Jews had been given so many benefits: the law and the covenants, the glory of God present in their midst, the promises of God and eventually through them came Christ. Yet in spite of this, they were being excluded from the kingdom of God whereas the Gentiles were responding in faith. So in light of that reality, one might be tempted to think God's promises to the Israelites had failed.

Now this is not a trivial concern. If God made all these promises to Israel and yet now on a whole the Jews were failing to come to faith, then it begs the question, "Has God failed to keep his promises?" And then by implication, the follow-up question is, "If God didn't keep his promises made in the OT to the Israelites, how can we have any assurance he'll keep the promises made to us in Christ?" Paul laid out these wonderful promises in Romans 8, that in Christ there's no condemnation for us, that we've been adopted into the family of God and the Holy Spirit indwells in us, that God is working all things for our good and that nothing in all creation can ever separate us from his love. So are they all paper promises? Does God make grandiose promises he never means to keep? Because if he failed to keep his promises to the Jews, why should we expect him to do any better with us?

Can you feel the weightiness of those questions? It's important that Paul addresses this concern head-on, and does so in v. 6 when he says, **"But it is not as though the word of God has failed."** Paul's answer is that God has not violated any of his promises. God's Word hasn't failed. If it had failed, if God promised one thing and then didn't follow through on it, then yes, we'd have a reason to doubt the promises given in Romans 8. God would be untrustworthy. He'd be like a slimy used car salesman who would tell you whatever you wanted to hear to trick you into buying a car. But Paul says, God's not like that. His promises are true. His Word hasn't failed. God was trustworthy then and he's trustworthy now.

But this then results in a tension that Paul needs to resolve and the rest of this chapter (and really all of Romans 9-11) is about explaining how God indeed has been faithful to his promises to the Jews and therefore is certain to be faithful to the promises made to us in Christ. So as we work through this, we need to keep this big picture in mind: Paul is defending God's faithfulness by explaining how God has been faithful to his promises made to the Israelites. Therefore, by implication, we can rest assured God will remain faithful to all his promises given to us as Christians.

So Paul has told us that God hasn't failed to keep his word, but now he's going to need to explain how that's true since it doesn't look that way. If God made promises to save the Jewish people, and yet they're not being saved, how is it that God's Word hasn't failed? So to begin answering the question of whether God's Word has failed or not, we need to move on to our second point which sums up the answer to the implied question of whether God's promises to Israel have failed, answering it Paul says...

2. **No, because the promises are only for those individuals God has chosen.**

Look back in your Bible and let's see how Paul explains this. Look at v. 6-8. **“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”**

What Paul is doing here is correcting a common misunderstanding of what it means to be God's people. The standard Jewish understanding he's pushing against here is the mistaken belief that the Israel to whom all the promises were made included all those physically descended from Abraham. In other words, they thought the promises were for every single Israelite. On the contrary, Paul claims the promises were never for all of ethnic Israel such that it included everyone who could trace their genealogical heritage back to Abraham. Instead the promises were only for a select few within Israel.

Paul states this three different times throughout these verses. The reason God's Word hasn't failed is because first, **“not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel”** (v. 6), second, because **“not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring”** (v. 7), and third, in v. 8, **“it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”** These are all saying the same thing: the promises were never made to every single Jew. If they were, then yes, one could conclude that God's Word had failed, but that was never the case. Not every Jewish person physically descended from Abraham was truly one of his children who was to be a recipient of God's promises. Some are, and others aren't. Being Jewish didn't guarantee salvation.

Now this was a difficult concept to grasp (and it may still be for us), the idea that God's promises given throughout the OT weren't for every single individual Jew who could trace his lineage back to the patriarchs. So Paul's going to have to make his case that what he's saying here is true. In particular, he's going to have to explain the distinction

made in v. 8 between “**children of the flesh**” and “**children of the promise.**” He said that it’s not the children of the flesh who are children of God – meaning that being the biological offspring of Abraham doesn’t mean they’re automatically saved. Rather it’s the children of promise who are counted as his offspring.

So who then are these “**children of the promise,**” this true Israel within the whole of ethnic Israel, and how does one become numbered among them? The answer comes through two examples Paul uses to demonstrate what makes an individual a child of the promise is not their ancestry or birth order or anything they’ve done, but rather it’s purely by God’s sovereign electing choice. Let’s take a look at how Paul illustrates this by moving on now to our third point...

3. Example #1 - Ishmael and Isaac

God promised Abraham a child, a promise he made when he and his wife Sarah were well-advanced in years. Look back in your Bibles again at v. 9. “**For this is what the promise said: ‘About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.’**” This son, who was named Isaac, was the “child of the promise,” that is, it was through Isaac that God’s promises to make Abraham into a great nation would be fulfilled. In fact, Paul quotes from the book of Genesis in v. 7 to illustrate this promise when God says, “**Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.**” So Isaac is the child of promise, both because his birth was promised, and it would be through his offspring that God’s other promises would be fulfilled.

But if you recall, Isaac wasn’t the only child Abraham had, was he? There was a long gap between God’s initial promise to Abraham and the birth of Isaac, and during that time Abraham grew impatient and took matters into his own hands. Abraham had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar and since God hadn’t opened Sarah’s womb, Sarah told Abraham to lay with Hagar and have a child through her. Now I know this is a really bizarre concept for us, but in the ANE, it was a custom to permit a man to produce an heir through a maidservant if his wife was unable to bear him a child. So this is indeed what Abraham does and as a result, Hagar gives birth to a son named Ishmael. It’s many years later when Sarah give birth to Isaac.

So then we have two sons who could legitimately claim Abraham as their father and who could therefore be potential recipients of God’s promises. But yet the promise comes only through Isaac, not Ishmael. God says it is through Isaac that Abraham’s offspring will be named. Ishmael is not the child of the promise: only Isaac is. So the point Paul is making here is just because someone was biologically related to Abraham didn’t automatically mean they were recipients of God’s promises. Here at the very headwaters of the Jewish people, God chose Isaac and not Ishmael, even though Abraham was father to them both.

So this is the first example of how God’s promises come through his choosing and not simply because someone had Abraham as their father. But having used this example, one could potentially object to this saying, “Well, true: Abraham was father to them both, but Ishmael was an illegitimate son because he was conceived through Abraham’s

midwife Hagar and not this wife. Thus it's not any surprise that God's promises came through Isaac because only Isaac was his legitimate son through his wife Sarah."

That's a fair objection and so Paul needs to dig deeper for a crystal clear example to prove his point that the promises of God are given to those of God's own choosing and not merely by heredity. Fortunately for Paul, he has such an example provided by the two sons Isaac has. So moving on now to our fourth point, we need to consider...

4. Example #2 - Esau and Jacob

Look at how Paul further develops his argument in v. 10. He says, **"And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls - she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"**

Rebekah, Isaac's wife, is a critical point of comparison. Like Sarah, Rebekah is barren, and her barrenness is overcome by a supernatural work of God. Furthermore, both of them have sons who have a potential rival: for Isaac it was his half-brother Ishmael and for Jacob it was Esau. But in the case of Esau and Jacob, there isn't anything that would give one an advantage over the other. Both were conceived at the same time and had the same mother and father. The only advantage Esau had over Jacob was that he was the first out of the womb and therefore considered to be the "older" brother. Otherwise, they're completely identical. As a result, both Jacob and Esau have equal claim to the promises of God. There's no distinction between them other than Esau was born first and therefore by cultural norms he had the rights of a firstborn child.

Yet, the promises of God don't extend to Esau. God chooses Jacob to inherit the promised blessings and Esau, like Ishmael before him, is rejected, even though they both have equal claim due to heredity. So then the question is, "Why?" Why did God choose Jacob and not Esau? Well, what does the text say? Look again at v. 11-12.

"Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls - she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'"

There are both affirmations and denials here that we need to see.

Let's start with the denials. What *didn't* affect God's choice? What played no role in God choosing Jacob over Esau? We're told Rebekah was informed **"the older will serve the younger"** even **"though they were not yet born"** which is one way of saying their character or behavior had no role to play in God's choosing of Jacob over Esau. In fact, Paul makes it very explicit when he adds they had **"done nothing either good or bad."** Furthermore, he says a little later in v. 11 that it was **"not because of works."** So Paul is stating in various ways that there was nothing about either Jacob or Esau that caused him to choose one over the other.

Now I need to emphasize this point because we often think God's choice is based on something in us. When Christians talk about the doctrine of election or predestination, they'll sometimes insist that God chooses based on foreseen future faith. They'll claim God knows in advance who will believe and that he chooses to save those he knows will one day believe in him. But if you think that, I need to call you back to this passage. Paul explicitly denies that anything Jacob or Esau did, either good or bad, had any affect on God's choosing of one over another, and that would include exercising faith.

Now I ask you, if Paul believes God chooses on the basis of future faith he foresees in the individual, wouldn't this be a good place for him to state it? He could easily say that Jacob was chosen over Esau because of Jacob's character or belief. Yet he says nothing about faith serving as a precondition for God's choice. Rather, he emphatically denies that any future behavior from the twins has any bearing on why Jacob was chosen and Esau wasn't. Paul's silence on this point is deafening. I don't know how Paul could be any clearer that human works - either for good or bad - have nothing whatsoever to do with God's choice.

So that's the denial side of the coin. Paul is crystal clear that nothing about either of the twins determined that God would choose Jacob over Esau. Instead, what positive reason does Paul highlight as the basis for God's choice? Look closely again at v. 11 because he states it twice there. He says in v. 11 **"though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls..."**

Paul gives two reasons given for God's choosing of Jacob over Esau and both of them rest in the will of God. First, it's not because of any works they would or wouldn't do, but **"because of him who calls."** God is the one who calls, and it is because of him, his sovereign choice, that stands behind why Jacob was chosen. Furthermore, this is elaborated on more when Paul says it was done **"in order that God's purposes of election might continue."** In other words, God was not dependent upon human obedience or sin in accomplishing his will - for if he was, his word would have indeed failed long ago! We're sinful people who are enslaved to sin: if it was contingent upon us to merit God's favor, God wouldn't choose anyone! Rather, we can be certain of the fulfillment of his promises because God elects people to receive those promises. When he calls those people he has chosen to himself, he always accomplishes whatever he determines he will do.

Thus Paul quotes from Malachi 1 saying, **"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,"** meaning that in terms of God's choice, he set his love on Jacob by choosing him to be the recipient of the promises while he **"hated"** Esau in that God did not choose him, but instead allowed him to continue in his sinfulness and suffer the result from it. That's not to say that God didn't show kindness and mercy to Esau in a general sense. After all, God allows the rain to fall on both the righteous and the wicked. But God did not choose Esau to receive the covenant promises. Only Jacob received those, and the only reason Jacob received them was because of God's sovereign electing choice, not because of anything either of the twins did, for good or evil.

And what God did back then is what God still does today when it comes to salvation. Remember, the reason Paul is bringing up Isaac and Jacob and Esau is to illustrate why it is that many Jews are not believing in Christ. It's not because God's Word has failed in that God promised to save every Jew who was descended from Abraham and now he's not; salvation was always by God's electing choice, apart from human works. Thus God is still faithful to his promises because those God has chosen are indeed being saved, and will be saved, because it depends not on anything we do but on God's sovereign purpose in election and his effectual calling.

Conclusion

What this all means then is what St. Augustine said long ago back in the fifth century: "We are not chosen because we believe; we believe because we are chosen." God's electing choice brings about the faith that saves those he has chosen; we're not chosen because God foresaw in us our future faith. God is absolutely sovereign in his choice and is not influenced by anything in us. That's the take away from Paul's example of Jacob and Esau - God's blessing and the covenant promises came to Jacob not because of what he did or didn't do, either for good or bad, but rather before they were born, before they had done anything at all, God set his saving love on Jacob and not Esau.

Now I recognize that teaching this is probably not the way for me to win friends and influence people. I know many of you don't like this idea. The belief that God chooses us apart from anything in us rubs you the wrong way. It raises up all kinds of questions and objections. In fact, if you look ahead to v. 14 you'll likely find one of your objections being voiced by Paul, but that's for next week. I know you have questions and those will be addressed as we move on because Paul himself raises them.

But for now I'd ask you to simply recognize that regardless of how it makes you feel, regardless of how many issues and concerns it raises for you, this passage of Scripture is teaching clearly and unambiguously that God's choice is not based on anything within us. I think Paul makes that crystal clear in this passage: God chooses in accordance with his own sovereign purposes who he will save, apart from anything in us.

Thus, God's Word hasn't failed because all those God has chosen will receive everything God has promised to them. And what was true for the Jews is true for us Christians. The promises of Romans 8 are certain because, as Paul wrote back in Romans 8:29, "*Those whom he foreknew he also predestined... And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*" God's Word never fails. Everyone God elects to salvation will receive salvation for they will be called, they will be justified, and they will be glorified. God's calling and election are sure: he will save all that he sovereignly chooses.

So let's close now, coming to our sovereign God in prayer, humbly asking him to confirm the truth of his Word in our hearts and calm the restlessness and uncertainty we may feel.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.