

Sermon 3: The Doctrines of Grace: Unconditional Election: Part 2

Most people do not realize this but the doctrine of God's sovereign grace in election is brought up by Paul in Romans 8-9 to give assurance of salvation. Paul wants to ground the faith of suffering Christians whose lives feel like they are spiralling out of control and implying God does not love them or is too weak. He grounds their assurance by showing how all things including suffering are working together for the good of those God is calling according to His purpose. Paul then reveals that God has a plan that began in eternity past as He predestined for salvation those whom He fore-loved. And all who He fore-loves will be called, justified and finally glorified. There is no uncertainty of a happy ending, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. God is able to perform what He wills, our assurance rests on God's election.

But what about the Jews they were the elect of God and they have not believed? This is the problem that Paul is addressing in Romans 9-11. Paul is defending the glory of God, His power to save, His faithfulness to keep His promises, and His ability to bring His plans to pass. Romans 9 is a defence of God being able to do all that He says He will do, that God always saves His elect. The first 5 verses start with Paul's emotional distress that the Jews who were in the most advantageous position to receive Christ rejected Him, as it lists the things that made them most likely to receive Him. But Paul's defence of why the Jews have not believed and the plan of God has not failed, and election is still our basis for assurance is a simple one. It is well summarised in v6, 'But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.'

Paul's answer to the problem of Jewish unbelief is that it is intentional, God never intentioned to save all of Israel but a smaller group, an elect group, a remnant from Israel. The rest of chapter 9 flows from this one verse. Paul states his principle here that God is not saving the whole nation but only a part of it. This of course would contradict the expectations of the first century Jews who assumed that all Jews apart from those who chose to apostatize would be saved. So having stated the overarching truth of election in 9:6 he then goes on to give historical demonstrations of this principle in v7-13. There he shows how God distinguished between Ishmael and Isaac, and Jacob and Esau. No doubt Paul's statements that God elects not on the basis of race or works would upset a lot of people and raise many objections. The objections of justice and free will are anticipated in v14-23. Paul then concludes this little discussion showing that God in His sovereignty is making His perfect will and promises come to pass by saving some from both Gentiles and Jews v24-29.

Romans chapter 9 is then a storm centre for the debates around the doctrine of election. Why God saves some and not others is the very question that election focuses upon. A very common way of trying to avoid the doctrine of election is to say that Romans 9 is dealing with the question of the election of nations, not the question of individual election for salvation. Because 9:13 is a quote from Mal. 1:2-3, which is dealing with the nations of Israel and Edom; and because the question Paul is dealing with is the question of Jewish unbelief and Gentile inclusion some feel that this text can be removed from the table with regards to the question of individual election to salvation. This however cannot be sustained. It is true that Paul is discussing the question of the nation of the Jews, but we must also appreciate that Paul is distinguishing why some individual Jews are being saved and why others are not. Paul is arguing that Israel's so called 'national' election is fulfilled in the 'partial' election of Israelites to salvation in Christ. Secondly, Paul distinguishes between the individuals of Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau not the nations they represent. We have to allow Paul to be his own interpreter instead of telling him what he must mean if

he quotes a particular text from the OT, even if the original context is speaking of nations and not individuals.

We can see in v6 that Paul is using the word 'Israel' in 2 different ways. The first designation is easy for us to understand because Paul adds the words 'not all who are descended from,' before it. Here Paul is alluding to the historical nation of Israel who originate from Jacob/Israel. The offspring of Jacob who are Jews by birth. So Paul is saying that not every true born Jew is part of 'Israel.' So what is meant by the second use of the word 'Israel.' He is using the word to refer to those Jews who have been chosen by God for salvation in Christ. If you like you can distinguish between physical Israel and spiritual Israel, fleshly Israel and elect Israel. The point is this, Paul is revealing that the reason why all Jews did not and do not believe in Christ is because God has chosen that only part of the nation will become part of the church. God's plan is coming to pass just as He planned.

V7-13

Paul launches from his statement in v6 that not every Israelite is part of spiritual Israel with a follow up in verse 7, 'and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'" Just as in verse 6 Paul used the word Israel with two meanings in this verse he uses the word 'offspring/seed' with two different meanings.' V8 is Paul's elaboration on what he means, '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.' If we had to make two columns representing those who are elect and those who are not from 7-13 we would have:

Israel-Israel;
offspring-offspring;
child of Abraham-child of Abraham;
Child of God-child of flesh;
child of promise-child of Abraham;
Isaac-Ishmael;
Sarah-Hagar;
Jacob-Esau;
loved-hated.

And from verses 14-18 we could add:

Moses-Pharaoh;
Mercy-hardening.

And from verses 19-23:

Vessels of mercy-vessels of wrath.

Paul is using these distinctions to show that God's promise does in fact get fulfilled, every time. Paul is pointing out the mode of fulfilment, the promise is fulfilled to one of Abraham's sons not all, but the promise is still fulfilled.

Now as soon as we get into the stories of these people a number of excuses are anticipated by Paul. Paul is anticipating that the Jew in his audience would have a ready explanation for why Isaac and not Ishmael was chosen and the other passed over. Hagar was an Egyptian and not Abraham's original wife and Ishmael was born of a lack of faith. We also see that Ishmael mocked Isaac probably by Hagar's influence so that Sarah wanted to banish them (Genesis 21:8-10). So Paul brings in his next set of examples in order to show that God's election is not based on our works or race but on His sovereign grace.

In verse 10 Paul moves on to Jacob and Esau, 'And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac.' Here we see one woman, not two, bearing sons by one man. Also the boys were twins having the same birthday. This closes the door on any thoughts about Hagar being Egyptian and the other racial explanations that others might suggest. But there is still the objection related to works. Paul then moves to close the door on the objection raised on the basis of works, v11, '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--.' Here we see that God's choice is not based on their works but came before their works. In other words if we go back to Abraham and ask, why did God save him, some Jews would say it was because he was a good man, but he wasn't. God saved them out of idolatry when they were bad not because they were good, when they were serving other gods not when they were serving Him, Joshua 24:2, 'And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.' Why did God choose Isaac and not Ishmael, was it because of his mother, because he mocked Isaac? No Paul is telling us that God did not choose on the basis of race or works but in accordance with His own will. Why did God choose Jacob and not Esau, it could not have been on the basis of race, was Jacob a better person than Esau? No we see that Jacob swindled his brother from his birth rite and blessing and deceived his dying father. Paul explicitly tells us that God did not elect on the basis of anything in Jacob, but by His own determination. The reason for the choosing of Jacob and not Esau lies in God and not man. God's purpose of election was not started on the basis of race or works and it is not progressed on that basis either. This all goes to prove that the faithfulness of God to His promise to Israel is coming to pass in His saving of some on the basis of grace not works or race.

Paul further emphasizes the independent nature of God's sovereign election by showing that the normal rights of the firstborn were not involved in the decision either, another affirmation that God was not persuaded to save on the basis of what he saw in them, v12, 'she was told, "The older will serve the younger."' Paul then quotes Malachi 1:2-3 as further proof of God's distinguishing love between Jacob and Esau.

All of this to prove that God saves some and not all, that He is faithful to His intentions and is not weak or a liar. All of this reinforces the basis upon which God saves. He does not save all Jews because race is not what influenced His decisions, nor does He save the deserving, no doubt the position that the law-keeping Jews would see themselves in. Grace not race or works, this is Paul's contention and the outcome of his argument.

V14-16

Paul has just made the statement that God never intended to save every Israelite, defending God's power to perform His purpose by limiting its scope in election. He is demonstrating that God does not save us on the basis of race or works but on the basis of a sovereign free gracious election. He has just clarified that our salvation does not depend upon any foreseen works, or anything in us but is determined by God alone. Jacob was chosen for salvation before he was born and Esau was not. Paul knows that this sounds like God is being unjust. And so Paul anticipates objections and answers them. We see that he has two questions in mind in v14 and v18, the first relates to God's justice, the second to man's will and accountability.

Paul teaches us a fundamental assumption we need to emulate in v14, 'What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! Paul acknowledges that the doctrine of election if pushed in a certain direction can raise the question as to whether God is being

just or not. He does not run from the question but raises it. Now I believe that there is any number of arguments that Paul could have used here to settle the issue. He could have argued that Esau was sinful in Adam and that the only obligation God had toward Esau was judgement. However, instead of entertaining our God accusing enquiries he speaks in the most emphatic terms of the impossibility of God being unjust. His answer is 'By no means!' or 'God forbid.' We could say 'absolutely impossible.'

I find Paul default approach in these questions to be a stark contrast to the accusing way we normally think about. We find God guilty until He gives a satisfying logical explanation that warrants my faith. God has to give a credible answer to every possible answer I can conceive and if He doesn't pass I judge Him inadequate. He is guilty until proven innocent. Notice Paul's approach, God is of course innocent, and He never gets put on trial. We see Paul silencing the possibility of God being unjust. He does not live in a world that is indebted to Descartes who doubted everything in order to establish truth, making scepticism a basic premise for Western thought. He does not live after the enlightenment that sees man as the measure of all things and thinks himself competent and has the right to question the motives of God's workings. He does not live in a post-modern society that doubts the possibility of certainty. Paul's worldview is biblically informed. He is treating God as God not as an object of scrutiny for our amusement. He refuses to entertain our playful scepticism as if the character of God is another abstraction we can playfully remake in a game. God's innocence is not something to be doubted but assumed. He will not tolerate man to toy with remaking God as He is not. He will not allow the majesty and glory of God to be trivialised. He does not indulge conspiracy theories, or the constructions of what you think might be clever or possible. He believes in the God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture and sees any line of questioning that views God as an object for observation and not a God to be worshipped as blind. Look at v20, 'But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"

Now if that line of argument does not satisfy your questions, your frustration has only just begun because Paul does not give a logical explanation for how God can be just in election, instead Paul appeals to the OT word of Scripture as an authority and affirms God's sovereign choice in election, v15, 'For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." Please notice that Paul answers the question of injustice by stopping it in the water (negation) and then by asserting God's sovereign right to save whoever He wants. He also changes the topic from a question of justice to the more pertinent issue of mercy. We will see that this subject change addresses our concerns of injustice and much more bringing our whole of thinking back on track. If you are asking questions that relate to justice and are not thinking in terms of mercy you have been thinking in the wrong way altogether.

Ironically when those who disagree with the doctrine of God's free election argue they usually make appeals to God's character specifically God's love. They rationalise that God is a God of love so He must love everyone equally! Paul too makes appeal to the character of God, namely His mercy and instead of saying that God is at the mercy of His mercy he teaches that God is free in who He has mercy upon not obligated to have mercy on all. This is the second way of thinking about God that we need to learn from Paul. Paul does not see God as a slave of His nature, but free. We can easily fall into abstracting God and forgetting that He is a person. Systematic theology can be a danger that leads to this because in systematic theology we tend to speak of God's attributes, that is those characteristics of God or those things fundamental to His nature, God is holy, gracious, loving, merciful, etc. However, there is a danger of abstracting God and making His actions a direct effect in relation to certain attributes. So instead of seeing God's mercy as something that is applied

by a person in keeping with His nature, we can abstract God's mercy so that it becomes a driving principle that He must submit all things to. Many errors in theology come from making one attribute a tyrannising principle that dictates to the person of God.

This is a very basic mistake when we think about God and there are two opposing extremes we need to avoid. On the one hand we need to avoid making God's will subject to His love or mercy or grace forcing God to be at the mercy of any one of these. And on the other hand we have to avoid so exalting will that it is no longer informed by the person of God. We must guard against these extremes by viewing God as a unity and using the bible to tell us how God's will and mercy interact. Paul tells us that God does not have mercy upon all but on who He wills to have mercy. Paul is emphatic about this point that God's mercy is free, for not only is God not the slave of His mercy but He does not give it based on anything in us, v16, 'So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.'

Paul answers a justice question by changing topic and talking about mercy, why would he do that and how does it defend the glory of God in election? Firstly, let me say that Paul is doing this deliberately. I do not think that Paul randomly changed topic in order to merely affirm God's sovereign right to elect whom He will. The change of topic from justice to mercy is central to the whole question of salvation. You see if God were to be just and treat each and every one of us according to justice, how would it end for us? Each one of us would go to hell! Justice for sinners is a fearful thing, we need mercy not justice. Now concerning Jacob and Esau, both are sinners in Adam, both have an imputed guilt and are through their federal head, their covenant representative came under condemnation and if God were to be just both would be damned. Jacob and Esau are not neutral but children of Adam. So instead of justice for both God has mercy on Jacob. He does not treat Jacob according to his standing in Adam, He deals with him according to mercy.

This reminder that Jacob did not deserve salvation but was a sinner in Adam also helps us see that God's passing over Esau for salvation was not neglecting someone who was sinless but someone who was a sinner in Adam. Esau did not deserve salvation, neither did Jacob; God was not obliged to save Esau and didn't, nor was He obliged to save Jacob, but in His mercy He chose to. His choice to save was not coerced, there was no good in Jacob foreseen or otherwise that influenced God's choice; there was no faith or works in Jacob foreseen or otherwise that twisted God's arm. God could have rightly overlooked Jacob for salvation as fallen in Adam but chose not to deal with him according to justice as He did with Esau, but according to mercy and saved him.

So we see that God passing over Esau for salvation is not a matter of injustice, but justice. Jacob's election to salvation was a case of mercy and not justice. Anyone who is ever saved is saved on the basis of an unearned mercy, a mercy that is God's prerogative to give, a mercy that is not given to all. This is the essence of Paul's point, God is not unjust He is merciful. Now Paul answers some questions but leaves us with many more. Let me be a fool and multiply the questions but then try and show you based on what we have seen in Paul's method how we are to deal with these difficult questions. Here are some other questions we could add to the mix.

Why doesn't God decide to save all why does He save only some?

Why did God predestine all of humanity to fall in Adam?

Why did God create the devil to cause mankind to be plunged into sin?

Why didn't God stop Adam from sinning by His sustaining grace as He did with the angels who did not follow satan?

I am sure that you could add to that. But I gladly place those conundrums before you in order to show you that we need not fear questions that might imply an accusing finger at God. Like Paul we need not run from them in fear but can face them as long as we face them in the right manner. There is more that we will learn from the next section but let me gather up what we have learnt so far.

First, be aware of your sinful inclination to accuse God and counter it with a deliberate submission to Scripture. Refuse to all any forced conclusions that are based on guess work, reductionism, or a preference for your own ideas. Submit yourself to Scripture in accepting that it can make affirmations about God without explanations. We believe the bible not when it makes sense but when it doesn't, it is not faith when we accept things when they have been explained to our satisfaction but when they don't seem to make sense. Ground your confidence in God not in a full explanation of every conceivable question you may have but on the fact that He can be trusted and does not lie. Remember that you are a creature that does not have an infinite mind, nor do you have all the facts, therefore you are ill equipped to judge God's methods and motives, never mind the fact that you are a creature and He is the Creator. Remember that His ways are not your ways and all the logic that we find useful for life in time and space with other finite creatures is not all there is, and is not a fit toolkit to judge God. But we are not without props for faith. We have the bible which gives us a partial picture, it gives us the beginning and the end, and something of God's workings. We have the promises and a clear picture of God's character who cannot lie or deny Himself, He can never be unjust. We also have creation which through the things that we can see can have an assurance that God does things well and in an orderly way. The revealed things can bolster our confidence in God's working in the hidden things. But most of all we have the cross. If you doubt that God is holy see Him satisfy His holiness at the cross; if you doubt that He is just see Him satisfy His justice at the cross; if you doubt His love, His mercy, His goodness, His wisdom, behold them all fulfilled at the cross. You may not understand every thought and motive of God, but you do not need to in order to know that He can be trusted and He does save. Take your thoughts captive to the cross.