

God's Choice of Isaac and Jacob

📖 Romans 9:6-13

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

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🌐 fbgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

Last time we ventured into Romans 9-11. In these chapters Paul gives an *Explanation* of God's plan for the covenant nation Israel. This explanation was necessary because God foreknew the nation Israel and yet when Israel's Messiah came they rejected their Messiah. In the wake of the rejection many Gentiles received their Messiah. This left the Messianic Jews wondering, is God's plan for our nation Israel off the table? Have God's covenant promises to national Israel been retracted? Many proclaim that God's covenant promises to national Israel have somehow been fulfilled in the past or that they forfeited the covenant promises due to their rejection of the Messiah. Now the Church is the true Israel that has permanently replaced Israel as the people of God. For those who maintain that Israel forfeited their covenant promises they interpret the covenants in a spiritual way as being fulfilled to the Church who is the true Israel. They conveniently do not say that we receive their covenant curses. These views that rule out any future restoration of national Israel are called supercessionism or replacement theology. They are sadly inconsistent with any normal reading of Romans 9-11. One sentence refutes the entire position, Romans 11:28-29, "From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." God will never go back on His promises. Therefore, Romans 9-11 explains that God's sovereign purposes are working out according to a dispensational arrangement in time so that God shows mercy to both Gentiles and Jews. Gentiles are presently enjoying God's mercy and once the fullness of the Gentiles comes in then God will show mercy to Israel so that "He may show mercy to all" (Rom 11:32). Understanding these chapters requires understanding mercy. Mercy is not grace. Grace is receiving something you do not deserve, such as if you were speeding and a police officer pulled you over and gave you a million dollars. That would be grace. Mercy is different. Mercy is not receiving what you do deserve, such as if you were speeding and a police officer pulled you over and did not give you a ticket. Mercy is not receiving what you deserve and what we all deserve from God is punishment. If we don't understand that then we can never exegete Romans 9-11 correctly. The entire point is that God has a sovereign purpose in time that is working out according to a dispensational arrangement so that God shows mercy to both Gentiles and Jews.

In 9:1 Paul begins with a triple oath. The first is a positive oath, "I am telling the truth in Christ." The second is a negative oath, "I am not lying." The third is a two witness oath, "my conscience testifies with me by the Holy Spirit." Why did Paul need to make a triple oath to affirm the veracity of his following words? Because he was the apostle to the Gentiles and as such his teaching relative to Moses and the Law was questionable to most Jewish believers. They did not really trust Paul. So to affirm the veracity of verse 2 he gives a triple oath. In 9:2 he says, "I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart." We said this refers to a great pain and a continual pain in his thought life relative to his nation Israel. So great and continual was this pain that he says in verse 3, "I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites..." The Greek means that he was on the verge of praying that Christ would no longer be His propitiation if it would serve to make Christ the propitiation for his brethren. Of course, this was not possible and so he did not pray this but he was on the verge of praying it many times in the past. With three expressions he clarifies that the great pain was due to the nation Israel. He refers to them as "my brethren" and as "my kinsmen according to the flesh," and as "Israelites." Paul leaves no question that he is referring to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which constitute the nation of Israel. To this physical nation belonged eight advantages. First, "the adoption as sons." God had only one nation as His son, that is Israel (Exod 4:22). Second, "the glory." The glory refers to the Shechinah Glory whom God gave to dwell among Israel. Third, "the covenants." God had only made covenants with the nation Israel. Fourth, "the giving of the Law." This refers to the giving of the Mosaic Law code which was to separate Israel from all the other nations so that they would learn loyalty to Him. Fifth, "the temple service" which refers to the priestly worship system God gave Israel that pointed to the Messiah. Sixth, "the promises" which relate to the coming Messiah within the covenant structure. Seventh, "whose are the fathers," referring to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and perhaps David. Eighth, "and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh," the greatest of all advantages. The Messiah, in his humanity, came from Israel and in particular from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the tribe of Judah and the house of David. Eight advantages belonging only to the nation Israel and yet the nation Israel rejected and Gentiles were receiving their Messiah. This was an enigma.

What went wrong? Paul states in 9:6, **But it is not as though the word of God has failed.** The Greek word translated **failed** is *επιπλω* and means "to drift away" as when a ship drifts off course. Had God's plan for Israel drifted off course? Had it gone astray such that it was no longer on course for the original destination? Of course not, although it seemed that way to some. The problem was not in God's plan for Israel but in Israel's understanding of God's plan. Understanding the problem is critical for understanding Romans 9-11. Most Jews in the 1st century had a misunderstanding of God's plan for them. They viewed God as coming and rescuing every Israelite simply because by physical birth they were Israelites. However, God's plan for Israel had always involved a temporary setting aside in order to show mercy to Gentiles for a time. Israel's understanding did not include this temporary setting aside. If you hold your place here and turn to Matthew 3:7 you see the dominant thinking of 1st century Jews. This is the passage where John is Baptizing. This was a very strange phenomenon

since in OT times they practiced baptism but all baptisms were self-baptisms; you baptized yourself by walking into water for various purposes. A person did not baptize another person. That is why they nicknamed John "the Baptizer." Baptizer was not his name, it was a nickname. His name was John bar Zacharias. But because he was baptizing people they called him John the Baptizer. Because this was so strange many were going out to see him. In verse 7 "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees" were "coming for baptism." I don't think their coming was genuine. Clearly they had not repented of the false systems of Pharisaism and Sadduceism. What they were trying to do was cozy up to John because many people were departing from them and turning to John and his message. That meant loss of money. So they were going out requesting baptism but John didn't allow them. Instead, he has these nice welcoming words, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance." In other words, you don't have repentance and I only baptize those who have repentance so if you want to cozy up to me you need to repent by casting off Pharisaism and Sadduceism and following the Law. Of course, they weren't interested in that. Then John shows what they believed where he says, "and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father...'" In other words, don't imagine in your head that because Abraham is our physical father we are Israelites and therefore automatically exempt from the wrath to come and automatically qualified for the kingdom. No way John says. Physical descent from Abraham is not enough. Alva McClain agrees saying, "The Jew would say the physical descent from Abraham makes him an Israelite. He declared any man born a Jew had a right to the promises of God."¹ John is saying nonsense.

Paul is saying nonsense back in Romans 9:6, **For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.** This statement is simple, it simply means that they are not all spiritual Israel who are physically descended from Israel. But the statement has caused great frustration for many interpreters. So we want to look at that and then come back to the truth. Some want to say that what Paul is saying is that the true Israel are not the physical descendants of Israel but the Church. This view is partly true and partly false. It is true that "the true Israel are not the physical descendants of Israel" but it is not true to say that "the true Israel is the Church." That's replacement theology and nowhere in the NT is the term Israel used of the Church. There are a few passages in addition to this one that are commonly used to say that true Israel is the Church. For example, Matt 21:43 where Jesus says to the Pharisees, "I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation, producing the fruit of it." People say the people producing the fruit of it is the Church and so the true Israel is the Church. The Church replaces Israel. Nonsense. The nation producing the fruit of the kingdom is simply a future nation of Israel. Another example is Galatians 6:16 and this is the pride and joy of all replacement theologians. Paul says, "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God." The identification of the "them" as "the Israel of God" which is required for replacement hinges on an expositor making the word translated "and" translate as "even." That is called an expegetical *kai* and that can be done, it is possible grammatically, but it is rare and good reasons have to exist to warrant that translation. What is more normal is to take *kai* simply as "and." When this is done the "them" is distinguished from "the Israel of God." This

is much more normal. What Paul is doing is making a special statement regarding "the Israel of God" because he has been particularly rough on the Jews in this letter and he does not want the believing Jews to feel like he is being rough on them if they have walked according to this rule. My point is simply to give two illustrations of interpretations that try to say that the true Israel is the Church. We could show others in Rom 2:28-29 and 1 Pet 2:9 but they are invalid when they are understood in their original context. The bottom line is that "Israel" is used 73 times in the NT and not once is it used of those who are outside the parameters of physical Israel. It always refers to all physical Israelites or to a subset of spiritual Israelites within Israel. So it's much better to read Paul here in 9:6 as saying "they are not all spiritual Israel who are physically descended from Israel." That would contradict the prevailing view who thought that all Israel are descended from Israel. That access to spiritual blessing was dependent on being a physical descendant only. Their theology had drifted off course, the plan of God had not. The plan of God for Israel had always been that there would always be a remnant of spiritual Israel within the greater physical Israel until the last days when the spiritual remnant would become "all Israel" (Rom 11:26) and then the kingdom would come.

He sets out to prove this in 9:7. **Nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants.** You see, the issue Paul is saying is not physical descent. They are not all children because they are Abraham's descendants. How many physical descendants did Abraham have? Eight that we know of. He had one descendant from Hagar, named Ishmael. One from Sarah, named Isaac. And six from Keturah, named Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah (Gen 25:1-4). Eight physical descendants, but only one of them was his child. Which one was his only begotten son? Isaac. And he quotes an OT passage to prove this. What chapter and verse? Gen 21:12, "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." Why was Isaac considered his only child? Because He was the line of promise. Physical descent was not enough. Spiritual descent was necessary.

Paul explains in 9:8, **That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of promise are regarded as descendants.** Look at the eight **children** again. How many are **children of the flesh**? Seven. The one child from Hagar, named Ishmael and the six from Keturah, named Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah. Why does God consider them children of the flesh? Because they were born of natural causes! There was nothing supernatural about the births of those children. Abraham just went into these women and they were all young enough to have children and so they had children. But those children are not **children of God**. Why are they not **children of God**? Because children of God are always born supernaturally, never naturally! Then we have Sarah's child, Isaac, and he is not considered a child of the flesh? Why is he not a **child of the flesh**? Because Sarah's womb was dead. She was 90 years old when she delivered Isaac. Isaac was therefore not born of natural causes. He was born of supernatural causes. He was therefore a **child of God**. All who are children of God are supernaturally born.

Now Isaac, it is stated, was also a **child of promise**. And Paul says it is the **children of promise** that are **regarded** or counted, **as descendants**. Paul is talking about how God counts because the Greek word translated

regarded means "counted." God counts differently than we count. We just look at all the kids and say, Abraham has eight children. WRONG! God looked at the eight children and He counted seven as children of the flesh and one as a child of God and that one child of God was the child of promise because he came into existence only because God made a promise. The others God never promised. They came about just because Abraham was living by the flesh. But this one was unique. That's why Isaac is a forerunner of the Messiah. That's why the terminology "only begotten son" originated with Isaac and is applied to the Messiah in John 3:16. They were their father's only begotten sons because they were uniquely born! Isaac of Sarah whose womb was dead, 90 years old and Jesus of Mary who was a virgin.

Rom 9:9 cites the word of promise God gave to Abraham about Isaac. And where does it come from? Gen 18:10. "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON." In the narrative it says "Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing." And when she overheard that next year at this time I will have a son "she laughed to herself, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" But He did come the next year and she did have a son, and so God got the last laugh. And they named him Isaac and God says to Abraham, take now your son, your only begotten son" (Gen 22:2). Now it was to this son, Isaac, that "Abraham gave all that he had..." (Gen 25:5) and to the others he "gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away..." (Gen 25:6), sent them east, away from Isaac. And so Abraham had many physical descendants but only one was a child of promise, only one a child of God and only one a true descendant to whom all the blessing would go, because that is how God counts!

Wrapping up the Isaac argument. Abraham had eight physical descendants we know about, there were probably others, but that did not make all eight of them spiritual descendants. Only one was a spiritual descendant because only one was born supernaturally by a promise of God and therefore a child of God. And so you can see how Paul is blowing to pieces the argument of the Pharisees and Sadducees that physical descent was enough. That had never been God's way. They hadn't read their bible very closely.

Now we move to the Jacob argument. This furthers the argument to the nth degree. There is no way around this. In Rom 9:10 Paul says, **And not only this**. In other words, there's more evidence. Here he gives the ultimate example that God's sovereign plan is working out according to His elective purposes which are hidden in Himself and His love. I have no problem with election. Election is a loving choice. Many people have a problem with election. It should not be a problem. Paul will show later in Rom 11:5-6 that election is all of grace and that if it's not true then the only alternative is works. That is Paul's entire argument in Romans 11:5-6. That is also Paul's argument in 9:11. Election is opposite of works. Election is also a function of God's mercy and we will see that starting in Rom 9:15. So we get now into an area many people don't like because they think that if God has His elect then He's not just. He's not fair. But Paul already predicted you would say that in Rom 9:14 so he's cutting you off there when he asks, "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!" So you may think that God electing one person and not another means God is not just but you would be wrong.

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also. By **also** Paul means in addition to Sarah. When Isaac grew up he took **Rebekah** as his wife and look what happened. **When she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His election would stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."** That last verse bothers a lot of people. We'll deal with it. It's a quote from the OT book of Malachi. While we're talking about quotes from the OT note that Paul is quoting a lot from the OT in Rom 9-11. He does so throughout the book but in Rom 9-11 the intensity of quoting from the OT increases, which shows that he's dealing with Israel.

We come to **Rebekah**. The passage behind the twin conception is Gen 25:21ff. What happened was Isaac married Rebekah when she was 40 years old and he had intercourse with her for twenty years but she was barren and so when she was 60 years old Isaac prayed to the Lord and she conceived. It was another supernatural birth. I point this out because you want to see that the entire founding of the nation Israel was supernatural. There was nothing natural about it. And **when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac**. The first thing we can note from the text is that there was one man who fathered the **twins**, not two men. Two men can conceive in the same woman if the acts occur in close succession and that has happened but the text makes sure we know that is not what happened. **She...conceived twins by one man** and so can anyone argue that Jacob was chosen and not Esau because Isaac was Jacob's father but some other man was Esau's father? No, no one can make that argument. Second, the word **conceived** requires that it was a single act of intercourse, not two acts. Twins can be conceived by two separate acts of intercourse as we noted, either by one man or two men, as long as it is within a short time frame, but that is not how Jacob and Esau were conceived. It's interesting the way the text is written because the way it's stated gives us two conditions necessary to deliver what is known as "identical" twins, though that isn't proven here, but we'll also look to Gen 25 for hints. For those who are in the know, in an ultimate sense geneticists will tell you there is no such thing as "identical" twins. However, we will assume it as a traditional category meaning that there was one egg and one sperm and after the conception the one zygote divided so that two offspring developed in the womb. But the essential argument of verse 10 is that the twins shared the same womb and they shared the same father, so you can't point to any reason as far as their conception or development that caused God to choose one over the other.

Rom 9:11 gives us the next essential part of the argument. **for though the twins were not yet born and had done nothing good or bad.** So before the **twins were born** and **before** they had done anything "moral" or "immoral." The second word translated **bad** is *φαυλον* and means "immoral" and so the first word *αγαθον*, which is usually translated "good" is here to be translated "moral." So to show that you can't point to anything moral or immoral that Jacob or Esau did which caused God to choose one over the other, he says before they were born and before they had done anything moral or immoral. What is the argument being made? That it's God's choice and His choice isn't based on anything outside of Himself.

Before we look at that conclusion let me point out that I think there are a couple of reasons to conclude that not only did they share the same womb, not only did they share the same father and not only was the choice made before they were born and before they had done anything moral or immoral, but they were identical twins, meaning they shared the same nuclear DNA and so you can't say one had a genetic advantage over the other. The first reason is what the text describes in Gen 25:26 that when Jacob was born "his hand was holding on to Esau's heel." I spoke with doctors who deliver babies and this note is significant because it's almost 100% certainty that this means they were in the same sac and if that is the case it is always twins. It is rare today, less than 1% of twins share the same sac, but if they do it's a foregone conclusion that they are identical twins. The reason is because when twins are born the sacs don't break at the same time. So for Jacob to be able to grab Esau's heel would require that he was in the same sac. The second reason is because of the description of the struggle within her. The text in Gen 25:22 says the children struggled together within her so that she wondered, what is going on? It's no news that twins in a womb will struggle, but if they are in the same sac the struggling is more intense. So it supports but doesn't prove they were in the same sac. The reason people think they were not identical is because of their looks. Esau was red and hairy skinned while Jacob was smooth skinned. But anyone who knows about twins knows that identical twins do not always look identical, and they always have distinguishing characteristics, often dramatic. There are contests around the world annually for the most unidentical identical twins. So looks prove nothing. The most significant thing is Jacob grabbing Esau's heel and this almost proves beyond any shadow of doubt that they were identical.

So identical twins, you can't argue that God chose one because of his genetics, same mother, can't argue that God chose because of patriarchy, same womb, can't argue that God chose because of the uterus, one father, can't argue that God chose because of the father, before they were born, can't argue that they had done anything, and before they had done anything moral or immoral, can't argue on the basis of morality. You can't even argue that God foresaw one would have faith and one did not for Paul would have put that right here if that had anything to do with it. As one author said, "Surely, if Paul had assumed that faith was the basis for God's election, he would have pointed this out when he raised the question in v. 14 about the fairness of God's election. All he would have needed to say at that point was 'of course God is not unjust in choosing Jacob and rejecting Esau, for his choosing took into account the faith of one and the unbelief of the other.'"² This Paul did not say.

The only reason that God chose Jacob and not Esau is stated in the middle of verse 11, **so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls.** If God didn't base His purpose on His choice then it would be based on works in some way and that would be contrary to grace. Note that the reason is purely within God Himself and has nothing to do with anyone or anything outside of Himself. This is very fundamental to grasp and very humbling.

The construction is **God's purpose** or *προθεσις* is His plan and when connected with *κατα* and the accusative of **choice**, *εκλογη*, it means "His plan based on His choice." God based His plan of what He would do on His choice of Jacob and not Esau. He did not base it on what he foresaw Jacob or Esau would do or what they did or who their parents were or anything outside of Himself. This might bother you but it doesn't matter if it bothers you, if it bothers you something is wrong with you, not with God. God always does what is right.

If you notice verse 12, this was not normal in the culture for the older to serve the younger, this was completely out of sync with cultural norms. But God's purpose was not according to cultural norms. God's purpose was that **"THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."** Usually it was the younger who served the older. The older was the firstborn and the heir and received a double portion. But it would not be this way in this case. God went against the cultural norm to establish His purpose. From before they were even born God had already purposed to reverse this order.

Now the way it worked out in time is important. Esau came in and he was famished and he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. So you see the outworking in time was according to a responsible choice. It was not determinism. God's election outside of time and man's responsible choices in time are not at odds with one another, they are not a contradiction, they are simply both true and we see this illustrated here. God said **"THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."** And Esau said, I am famished and sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are both truths that must be kept. Neither can be sacrificed. This is not supposed to be a problem in our thinking. It was not a problem in the biblical writers thinking.

As proof Paul says, **Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."** This really bothers people. It's a quote from the OT. Where does it come from? Mal 1:2. There are three Hebrew words for love; *ahav*, *chesed* and *dod*. The word used here is *ahav*. *ahav* love is the kind of love that is exercised before a covenant is made. For example, before marriage. It's the love that a boy has for a girl and a girl has for a boy. And before they enter into a marriage covenant they have an *ahav* love for one another. It's an affectionate love, an elective love, a love that says, "I have this strong affection for you and so I choose to love you." It's *ahav* love that leads to the second word used of love, *chesed*. *Chesed* love means I'm going to be loyal to you; it's a contractual love. It's a marital love. It's the love that says I've made a covenant with you and I'm going to be loyal to the covenant. The third word is *dod* and its love exercised after the covenant. So you have these three words for love in the Hebrew language and which word is used here? Well, it's that first kind of love, *ahav*. God is saying I have an affectionate love for Jacob and it is that love that resulted in God's loving them with a *chesed* love, choosing to enter a contract with Jacob. He did not do this with Esau.

Now the trouble is that on one hand the Bible teaches that God loves all men but on the other hand teaches that He loved Jacob and hated Esau. You have to understand that love and hate in this context are not emotional. Loving Jacob is parallel to choosing Jacob and hating Esau is parallel to not choosing Esau. It doesn't have anything to do with Jacob or Esau. It has only to do with God's affectionate love for Jacob that led Him to choose

to enter a covenant with Jacob. He did not have this kind of affection for Esau but at the same time it does not mean that God didn't love Esau in some other sense. In the Malachi context God did give Esau an inheritance, it was mountains of desolation, a wilderness, so it was not a great blessing, but God did give him something. What God gave Jacob was a great blessing. Often in Scripture to love someone means to choose to shower blessing on them whereas to not love someone means not to shower blessing on them. That is the case here. God chose to shower blessing on Jacob and not on Esau.

Now if you're feeling tension at this point and you're thinking, "This is not fair," then next week is for you. This is a mental vexation that we all face, this isn't the first time you've faced it, you've thought about this before and you've solved it in some way that helps you cope with it, usually a wrong way, usually a way that is contradicted by Scripture. Coping with it in a way that is wrong is not solving it. What you have to do is come to grips with what the real questions are because if you think this is unfair then you are asking the wrong question. You are asking, "Why did God choose Jacob and not Esau?" "Why didn't God choose both of them?" That is so far from the right question. The right question, if you are thinking biblically, is "Why did God choose either of them?" "Why did God choose to shower blessing on anyone?" The answer is given in Deuteronomy 7. Why did God choose Jacob? "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD *ahav* you [had an affectionate love for you that led to the covenant] and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers [that is the covenant]..."

Why did God choose Israel? Why did He come into a covenant with that nation? Because He loved that nation. Why did He love that nation? Because He loved them. It has nothing to do with them. It has to do with Him. That is what we have to come to grips with. Jacob didn't deserve His love but He is love and the fact is that He chooses to love in a way that showers blessing on one and not another. That is His prerogative. Nobody deserves any love or blessing from Him whatsoever and so it is and must be all of mercy that He chooses to shower love and blessing on anyone.

¹ Alva McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, p 180.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 9:10.