

God's Strategy of Global Blessing

📖 Romans 9:6-13

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Last week we studied Romans 9:6-13, God's choice of Isaac and not Ishmael and God's choice of Jacob and not Esau. The passage is very, very difficult and when I gave the lesson I was very careful not to say something for fear that I might err, that I may go too far because I felt there was more to the passage, there was a bigger picture and I wasn't seeing it yet. So I stuck to exegesis and didn't draw any theological conclusions. Doing exegesis is much safer than doing theology but, of course, most people are interested in discussing theology and not doing exegesis. I understand that, theology is fun, but it's more dangerous to do theology because you tend to draw inferences and play fast and loose with the text. And, of course, what happened after the lesson is someone asked me a theological question, "Are all men savable?" The question led me to believe that I may have miscommunicated because I didn't think I had mentioned salvation. Of course, I maintain that all men are savable in the sense that Christ died for all men. But I hadn't spoken about salvation. I'd been speaking about God's choice of Isaac and not Ishmael and God's choice of Jacob and not Esau; but what might have been communicated was that God's choice of Isaac was to salvation and God's choice of Jacob was to salvation, so that what Romans 9 is teaching in that scenario is that God picks and chooses who will be saved. I didn't think I had said that in the lesson and so I went back and searched the lesson. My discovery was that I did not find once that I used the word "save," "salvation," "go to heaven" or any equivalent expression. That was the very thing I had been very careful not to say although I can understand why it might be thought that is what I said.

The problem is that there has been so much influence of the Augustinian interpretation of election unto salvation in Romans 9 down through Church History that it is very difficult for people to interpret the text in any other way. They come to the text with preconceived notions. I do too. That's why part of the discipline of exegesis is putting aside your preconceived notions and doing the grammatical and historical research in order to approach the text objectively, let the text speak. And I was very careful to do that so that what I taught was that God chose to shower covenant blessing on Isaac and not Ishmael and on Jacob and not Esau. I didn't say that God chose them to be saved so that we develop a doctrine of election that says that God picks and chooses who will be saved. And I caution you against that preconceived notion because, for example, we read in John 6:70 that Jesus said to the twelve, "Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?" This

passage forces us to consider that *not* all election is unto salvation; for here is a clear example of Jesus having elected the twelve and yet only eleven of them were saved. Clearly then the election was not unto salvation but unto the office of apostleship, an office from which Judas turned aside (cf Acts 1:25). So it is entirely reasonable and entirely scriptural to state that not all election is unto salvation and that to discover what an election is unto we have to search the context.

What was the nation Israel elect unto? I think most would be forced to agree that God's election of Israel was *not* unto salvation because if it was then all Israelites would be saved. And that clearly is not true. Otherwise Paul could not say Romans 9:3, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites." All Israelites were not saved. Clearly then while the nation Israel was elect this election was not unto salvation. And I think what Paul is explaining here in Romans 9 is that very point because he is aiming his argument against the beliefs of Pharisaic Judaism that were so prevalent in the 1st century. Forster and Marston report, "The rabbis believed that the very fact of being in the chosen nation would guarantee anyone's salvation provided that he was not exceptionally wicked."¹ Those who were exceptionally wicked were the tax gatherers and harlots. This was incorrect theology. As Paul said in Romans 9:6, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel."

Now we see this play on the word "Israel" here that is much the same as the play on the word "Jew" in Rom 2:28 and 29. There he said, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly...But he is a Jew who is one inwardly." The distinction Paul is making in both passages is the same. That distinction is this: they are not all believing Israel who are descended from the man Israel. To understand this turn to Gen 32:24-32. This is the event of Jacob wrestling with a man who refers to Himself as God and who renames Jacob, Israel. In verse 24 Jacob wrestled with a man until daybreak. In verse 25, when the man saw that he had not prevailed against Jacob he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. In verse 26, then the man said to Jacob, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So in verse 27 the man said to Jacob, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And He said in verse 28, "You're name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." As with many other names in Genesis they were given due to some occasion. The new name given to Jacob was "Israel." This name is highly debated. It could mean "God strives" with God as the subject or "he who strives with God" making Jacob the subject. Because of Jacob's refusal to give up the fight and because the text says the new name Israel was given because "he had striven with God and with men and had prevailed" it is better to view the name as meaning "he who strives with God" with Jacob as the subject. The point of the story is to show that Jacob wrestled until he was broken and even then he would not let go until he received a blessing. Obviously Jacob knew that he was the lesser and needed a blessing from the greater. When Paul says in Romans 9:6 **they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel** he means they have not all striven with God as Jacob did. Jacob strived with God to the point of being broken, and even then he refused to let go until he received a blessing. All Israel, though they carried his name, did not follow in Israel's footsteps. In essence then,

although all Israelites were descended from Israel they were not all like him in that they were not all broken to the point of entering into a personal relationship with Him. Since the means of entering a personal relationship with Him is faith what Rom 9:6 is saying is that not all Israel had faith like Israel who had faith. This is nothing short of saying that there was a remnant of believing Israel within the nation that carried the name Israel. The idea was completely contrary to rabbinic teaching who taught that all Israelites were guaranteed salvation.

In 9:7 the word **nor** indicates that he is shifting to another argument. He will return to the argument of 9:6 later in 9:27 when he comes back to the remnant. But for now he shifts to a different argument. **Nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants.** The background of the argument in 9:7 is the false belief of the rabbi's that all Jews would be saved because they were Abraham's descendants. Forster and Marston report of the common belief of 1st century Judaism saying, "A widely accepted idea was that: "All Israel has a share in the world to come."² This share was due to descent from Abraham as John the Baptist stated so bluntly in Matt 3:9, "And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham." Alfred Edersheim writing in the 19th century to this point says of the Jewish belief. "...to Israel the Gehenna, to which all but the perfectly righteous had been consigned at death, had proved a kind of purgatory, from which they were all ultimately delivered by Abraham..."³ Here we see a fuller picture of Judaic beliefs which give the background for Paul's statement in 9:7. Observe that they are strikingly similar to Roman Catholic beliefs. The Jews held that Gehenna was a kind of purgatory where all Jews except the most perfectly righteous went upon death. After those who needed to be purged of unrighteousness in Gehenna had done their time they would be delivered by Abraham. The bottom line is that most 1st century Jews believed that all Jews were children because they were Abraham's descendants. Paul says exactly the opposite, they are not **all children because they are Abraham's descendants.**

Now the first person mentioned in this text is **Abraham** and so we better understand **Abraham** and how **Abraham** qualified for being a sharer in the ultimate blessing. Turn to Gen 15:6. Gen 15 is the text where God makes a covenant with Abraham. Up to this point God had made promises to Abraham but He had not yet entered into a covenant with Abraham. The covenant required the cutting of the animals which you see in verse 10. This is the way a covenant was made in the ancient world, animals would be brought and cut in half so there was the shedding of blood and the parties to the covenant who took upon themselves some obligation would pass between the pieces. What they were saying by passing between the pieces was "Let what has happened to these animals happen to me if I do not fulfill my word." So it was a very solemn occasion to enter into a covenant. In verse 17 God, appearing as "a smoking oven and flaming torch" passed between the pieces. In verse 12 Abraham did not pass between the pieces because "a deep sleep fell upon" him." So it is a one way covenant. Only God took upon Himself covenant obligations. Abraham had no covenant obligations. That is why verse 18 says, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram." Abram did not make a covenant with God. The covenant was initiated by the Lord God and its fulfillment depends entirely upon Him. The central component mentioned here in verse 18 is "the land." "To your descendants I have given this land..."

Here's a key question? Did God enter into this covenant with Abraham when he was an unbeliever or believer? Gen 15:6 makes the note that he was already a believer. The text says, "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." I would actually argue that the Hebrew grammar of Gen 15:6 is not saying that Abraham believed on this occasion but it is rather a textual indicator notifying us that Abraham was a believer already so that we realize that God entered a covenant with a believer and the covenant was not what saved Abraham but Abraham was saved by faith. The words translated "Then he believed" are a perfect tense and should be translated, "and having believed." Abraham had already believed in the Lord. The exact timing of Abraham's faith is not stated here but in Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2-8 every indication is that Abraham believed long before this covenant was made while he was still living in Mesopotamia. Then he moved to Haran and after his father died in Haran he moved to the Promised Land and it was at that time that God entered into the covenant with Abraham. So was it the covenant that saved Abraham? No. Abraham was already saved by faith before God made the covenant with him.

Turn back to Gen 12:1. This was earlier in Abraham's life when he was still in Mesopotamia. Some say he had already moved to Haran because of the previous verses but that would not fit with what follows in verses 4-5 or with Stephen's speech in Acts 7. God spoke these words to Abram while he was still in Mesopotamia, which was his country. "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; ²And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." What is God doing here? He's making promises. This isn't a covenant. The covenant doesn't come till later when Abraham has already moved to the Promised Land. This is in Mesopotamia. What is God doing here? He's making promises. In verse 1 there's the promise of a land, in verse 2 there's the promise to make of Abraham a great nation and to bless Abraham and to make Abraham's name great and through Abraham will come blessing, and in verse 3 there's the promise that God will bless those who bless Abraham and to curse those who curse Abraham and in Abraham to bless all the families of the earth. Global blessing. So is God's plan to bless only Israel? Only Jews? Incipient to the original promise is that Abraham is at the head of a nation that is going to bring blessing to the whole world. This is a key to understanding Romans 9. God did not choose Abraham to be a believer. Abraham was already a believer along with others at the time like Melchizedek. What God did was choose Abraham to be the head of a nation through whom blessing would come to the whole world. How would blessing come to the whole world through Abraham and his chosen nation? Through the Messiah who's humanity came from them. This is exactly the point Paul has already mentioned in Rom 9:5 when he said, "and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh." Paul's point is to show that God's strategy for blessing the world was to select Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be the seed line through whom the Messiah and His blessings would come to all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile.

So his point is not at all to say, these are the one's God chose to save. His point is to say, these are the one's God chose to be the channel through whom the Messiah would come and only those who believe in Him will be saved and enjoy the promises. This is proven by Gal 3:6ff so turn to Gal 3:6. Notice the context in verse 5 is that God gives the Spirit by hearing with faith and not by works of the Law. So the contrast is between faith and works. In that context in verse 6 Paul says, "Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." To prove the point. Verse 7, "Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. ⁸The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." Quote from where? Gen 12:3. Verse 9, "So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer." How is it that the Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith in Gen 12:3? Gen 12:3 says we will be blessed in Abraham. Because Gen 12:3 is a promise of the Messiah coming through Abraham. We as Gentiles are blessed because verse 9 says we have faith as Abraham had faith in the coming one, in Messiah. That God was going to send a Messiah was known as early as Gen 3:15 when the promise was made that God would send a seed of the woman who would crush the seed of Satan. God's promises to Abraham the believer was that the seed would come through him. Indeed, Paul says in 3:16, "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ." And when a Jew or Gentile believes in Christ they become a recipient of the blessing. Note Gal 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE" — ¹⁴in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." You see that salvation and the blessing and promise are all received "through faith." The contrast when it comes to salvation is always between faith and works, not between being elect or not. The election in Romans 9 is the election of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be the channel through which the Messiah would come. "Only if we grasp this will we understand Paul's explanation of why," in spite of the nation Israel being elected, many within Israel had rejected their Messiah and were not saved. The election was to be a channel of blessing, not to faith or salvation.

And so God's channel of blessing is being stated in Romans 9:7, **but, 'THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED.'** The word translated **descendants**, plural, is actually singular in both the Hebrew and the Greek. The translation would be better, "through Isaac your descendant will be named," the descendant being Jesus, the Messiah. God chose Isaac and not Ishmael to be the progenitor of the Messiah. This choice was made purely on the basis of God's sovereign right. It had nothing to do with anything Isaac or Ishmael did or would do. Whether or not Ishmael believed is a matter not clearly stated in Scripture but is entirely possible. In Gen 21:15, after Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away they eventually ran out of water. Hagar did not want to see the boy die so she sat down about a bowshot away from him and prayed to God. Gen 21:17 says that "God heard the lad crying" and so we learn that God cared about him. In Gen 21:18 God says "I will make a great nation of Him" and so we learn that God made promises to Him. In Gen 21:20 it says "God was with the lad" and so we conclude that

God remained with him. These statements may very well indicate that Ishmael was a believer but that does not mean that Ishmael was chosen to be the descendant of the Messiah; he most emphatically was not. God said explicitly in Gen 21:12, **'THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANT(S) WILL BE NAMED.'**

The difference set forth in Romans 9:8 is that **it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of promise are regarded as descendants.** But the word **descendants** is singular in the Greek and not plural and so the meaning is that it is **the children of promise** that **are regarded as** the seed line of the Messiah. Abraham had several **children of the flesh** but only one **child of the promise.** Which **child** constituted the line of promise? The seed line? Isaac. He was the **child of the promise.**

Now note the contrast between **the children of the flesh** and **the children of the promise.** What is this contrast all about? On one hand we know that **the children of the flesh** are natural descendants of Abraham. Abraham had natural descendants through his concubine Hagar and wife Keturah after Sarah had died. On the other hand we know that **the child of the promise** is a supernatural descendant of Abraham. Abraham had one supernatural descendant through his wife Sarah when she was 90 years old. And so we have **the children of the flesh** and **the children of the promise.** And as God counts only **the child of promise** as the **child of God, the child of God** then refers to those children who are born supernaturally, that is, by barren women. Sarah, the wife of Abraham was barren, and she supernaturally bore Isaac (Gen 11:30). Rebekah, the wife of Isaac was barren, and she supernaturally bore Jacob (Gen 25:21). Thus, Isaac and Jacob are the **children of God** as the expression is used here. We are to gather that they are the chosen line of the Messiah and that this line was from the start a supernaturally wrought nation. The expression **children of God** does not denote believers in general as I may have indicated last week. Instead it denotes one born of a barren woman so as to distinguish and show clearly God's chosen line of the Messiah as descending from Abraham through Isaac through Jacob.

Now while the contrast here is between **children of the flesh** and **children of the promise** there is actually more to the contrast. **Flesh** stands for "works" and "promise" stands for faith. We know this because the exact same contrast between flesh and promise is used in Gal 4:21ff. Galatians uses exactly the same terminology as Romans and I have often stated that since Galatians was written before Romans then Galatians gives in seminal form the truths that are later expanded in Romans. In Gal 4:21 Paul says, "Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?" Those who wanted to be under law were those who were being told that they must live by works and not by faith. Paul's argument was that if you live by works you'll be enslaving yourself to the sin nature and that if you live by faith you'll be freed by the Spirit. Verse 22, "For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman." Those two sons would be Ishmael and Isaac, one by Hagar and the other by Sarah. Verse 23, "But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise." So one was born naturally and the other supernaturally. That is the exact same thing Paul has taught in Romans 9. Now he says in verse 24 "This is allegorically speaking," meaning, not what modern allegorical interpreters mean, which is to deny the historicity of the Abraham story

altogether, just throw it out the window. No, Paul fully accepted the historicity of the Abraham story. His entire theological point rests upon it. By allegorically speaking Paul means "by correspondence." He wants to show a correspondence between the two women and the two children and how they contrast two ways of living, by works or by faith. Verse 25, "Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children." In other words, Abraham's going in to Hagar was a picture of works. But when we live by works we are enslaved to the sin nature. By contrast verse 26, "But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother." In other words, Abraham's going in to barren Sarah was a picture of faith and when we live by faith we enjoy freedom of the Spirit. As he goes on to explain in verse 27, quoting the OT, "For it is written, 'REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND.'" More numerous they may be but they are living by works and therefore in slavery and those who are living by faith are enjoying freedom. Verse 28, "And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise." The application he goes on to make is that there will always be those who insist that we live by works but we should separate ourselves from them and continue to live by faith. In any case, it is an interesting parallel to Rom 9 because it shows that what Paul has in mind by **children of the flesh**, and particularly Ishmael, is that Abraham got this child by works but the only way Abraham could get Isaac, the child **of the promise**, was by faith because Sarah's womb was as good as dead. Faith in the promises is the method by which God brought the Messiah into the world and all His blessing and yet Israel did not pursue Him by faith but by works, and therein lies the reason **they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel**, they did not all wrestle with God to the point of brokenness and then hold on and insist by faith that they receive the blessing.

What shall we say then? These things are not easy or for the faint of heart. But simply said, Romans 9 is not arguing that God elects who to save and who not to save. Romans 9 is arguing that God elected Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be the channel through which the Messiah would bring blessing to the whole world. God selected this strategy by His own sovereignty. Those who believe will enjoy the blessing. As one author says, "The choice of...Israel was not merely for their own benefit; it was not a guarantee that all Jews would be saved; it was so that God could *through them* do something for the world." In my thinking this is really not saying much more than the original promise to Abraham the believer in Gen 12:1-3. "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; ²And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." God was in effect choosing the believer Abraham to be the head of a nation that would ultimately bring blessing to the whole world. He could have chosen other believers such as Melchizedek to fulfill this role but that was not His purpose. God's purpose according to His election was to choose Abraham. In what form exactly would this blessing come to the world? In Christ. Galatians 3:16, "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your

seed," that is, Christ." It is Christ through whom all blessings flow to the one who comes to Him in faith and not works, whether Jew or Gentile. Gal 3:29, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

¹ Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History*, p 223.

² Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History*, p 221.

³ Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History*, p 221.