

I have a pastor friend who grew up believing that God merely knows the future –
he does not predestine us.

In fact, he was ordained in an Arminian denomination
and for many years preached against the sovereignty of God.

But then he started preaching through Romans.

He had made it through Romans 8, and thought seriously about stopping the series there.

Romans 9-11 seemed so daunting –

and it was all about Jew/Gentile relations

(which seemed so far foreign to issues of today) –

he had never heard a sermon series on Romans 9-11,

but he decided that since it was the Word of God,

it was his task to preach it.

That man – and his congregation – are now thorough-going Calvinists.

Introduction: Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of God in Christ (8:31-39)

I think sometimes we read Romans 9-11 in isolation from the first half of Romans.

But Paul’s whole point in Romans has been to explain the gospel –

the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;

the good news that God has done what the *law* could not do.

In fact, as we have seen throughout Romans,

the whole message of the book is built around this issue of the law.

The “what thens” of the book provide the structure for Romans 3-11.

Think back to the “what thens” of Romans:

3:1 “What then the advantage of the Jew?”

God had entrusted them with his oracles (his law)

so that his judgment might come through them to the world.

3:9 “What then? Are we Jews any better off?”

And through the rest of chapter 3 Paul explained our justification by faith,

apart from *works of the law*.

But the last thing he says in chapter 3 is that he is not trying to overthrow the law:

“On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

How?

4:1 “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham?”

All of chapters 4-5 are rooted in this question.

Abraham was not justified by works of the law, but by faith.

And the reason for that is because since Adam

all men were under condemnation and death.

So the purpose of the law was not to bring justification but to increase trespass.

So in chapter 6, when Paul says,

6:1 “What then shall we say? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”
he is still dealing with these issues of *law* and grace.

And Paul answers that sin is utterly inconsistent with the Christian life.

You are not under law, but under grace.

(once again – the last thing Paul says before launching another question
has to do with the law.)

and so he asks in verse 15 of chapter 6,

6:15 “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?”

Of course not – we have died to the law through the body of Christ.

And again in

7:7 “What then shall we say? That the *law* is sin?”

And in chapters 7-8 Paul will explain for us how the “*law* of the Spirit of life”
has set us free from the “*law* of sin and death.”

Indeed, God has done what the *law*, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

8:31 “What then shall we say to these things?”

At the end of chapter 8 Paul will, in one sense,
come to a resounding climax of his argument.

But in another sense, the end of chapter 8 connects back to chapter 3.

What about the Jews?

How do Jews and Gentiles figure into God’s purposes –

this had been the major theme of chapter 3;

it is now a major theme of chs 9-11

9:14 “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part?”

9:30 “What shall we say then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it?”

11:7 “What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.”

In other words,

the whole of Romans 3-11 is woven together by these “what then” questions.

And so here in chapter 9, we should recognize that Paul is *not* starting a new thought.

Paul concluded the last section (Romans 7:7-8:30)

by talking about God’s purpose in his call (8:28-30):

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,
for those who are called according to his purpose.*

*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined
to be conformed to the image of his Son,*

in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom he predestined he also called,

and those whom he called he also justified,

and those whom he justified he also glorified.

So Paul has introduced the idea of predestination –

that God has chosen some to be conformed to the image of his Son.

And in verses 31-39 Paul asks,

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?
He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all,
how will not also with him graciously give us all things?”

Paul speaks boldly of how *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

But this raises a problem – a difficulty that Paul is very conscious of:

What about Israel?

Didn't God choose Israel?

Paul, you are saying that *nothing* can separate God's chosen people from his love.

Nice try!

But we know our history too well!

God chose Israel – and yet *plainly* something *has* separated them from God's love!

Because while many Jews have believed,
most have not.

How can you say, Paul, that nothing can separate us from the love of God,
when God has obviously rejected the majority of *his people!*

Romans 9-11 is Paul's answer to that question.

Today we will look at the beginning of the answer
as Paul talks about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Next time we look at part 2 (Romans 9:14-29),
as Paul discusses Pharaoh and the history of Israel from the Exodus to the Exile.

Then we will work through Romans 9:30 – 11:6,
as Paul explains how Christ is
the “end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes,”
and how there is “a remnant, chosen by grace.”

And finally we explore the relationship between Jews and Gentiles
in the salvation of Israel (11:7-36).

You might say that Romans 9-11 is a redemptive-historical discussion
of God's purposes in election!

1. Paul's Grief: Israelites Have Not Listened (9:1-5)

I am speaking the truth in Christ –

*I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit –
that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.*

*For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers,
my kinsmen according to the flesh. (1-3)*

Paul's point is that he is not happy about the rejection of Israel.

He does not relish this part of the story –
and if his own damnation would save them, he would wish it!

After all, think back over biblical history:

Theirs is *the adoption*,
when God called Abraham to leave his father and go to the Promised Land,
when God said, "Israel is my son, my firstborn"
the glory,
when the glory of the Lord divided the waters of the Red Sea,
or when it came upon Mt. Sinai, or filled the tabernacle and the temple.
the covenants,
first with Abraham, but then with Israel through Moses, and with David
the giving of the law,
on Mount Sinai and on the plains of Moab
the worship,
from Mt Sinai to the tabernacle and the temple
and the promises.
to Abraham, to Moses, and through the prophets
To them belong the patriarchs,
and from their race, according to the flesh,
is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. (v4-5)

In other words, from the beginning of redemptive history until the present,
God's purposes of election have been bound up with Israel.
The whole story of salvation has been an Israel-centered story.

By the way, this is why it is *crucial* for you to understand the Old Testament.

Old Testament history is nothing less than the story of salvation.

If you don't understand the Old Testament,

then you don't understand why the death and resurrection of Jesus is important.

Sure, it is interesting – quite curious in fact –

that a man should die and be raised from the dead.

But so what?

Maybe it never happened before, and hasn't happened since,
but why should we care?

Because while the Christ – the Messiah – was certainly of Israel "according to the flesh" –
he is nothing less than the "God over all, blessed forever."

Some people have not liked this translation.

They cannot bring themselves to think that Paul would refer to Christ as God.

But the relative pronoun “who” must refer to someone.

And the Father is not referenced in the whole paragraph.

But the point here, as throughout the paragraph,

is to reinforce the centrality of Israel in God’s plans.

But even as Paul wants to reinforce the centrality of Israel in God’s plans,

he also wants to make it clear that these are *God’s* plans –

and we should always beware of assuming that *we* know better than God

what his plans may entail!

[Brothers and sisters,

in these days of economic doubt,

beware of assuming that you know better than God what he should do with your life!]

2. But the Word Has Not Failed: “In Isaac Will Be Called Your Seed” (9:6-9)

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.”

What does this mean?

Paul does not leave us to guess what he means by this!

This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God,

but the children of 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.

It is true that God chose Abraham’s seed to be his people.

But Abraham had several sons.

Ishmael was the firstborn son of Abraham.

But he was not the son of promise.

And after the death of Sarah, Abraham married Keturah

and together they had six more sons (the most famous was Midian,

father of the Midianites).

So it is not enough to say that Ishmael was the son of a slave-woman.

The sons of Keturah were sons of a free woman.

But they were not sons of promise.

Why?

Because God said that his promise was for the son of Sarah.

For that matter, I should mention that Jacob had twelve sons –
and four of those sons were sons of slave women.
But all twelve – including the sons of slave women –
were included in the promised inheritance.

Why?

Because God said that his promise was for the twelve sons of Jacob!

The point that Paul is making here is that physical descent guarantees nothing.

“It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God,
but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”

Abraham had eight sons – seven of whom were not counted as offspring.
Jacob had twelve sons – all of whom were counted as offspring.

What is the difference?

God’s promise.

What matters is what *God* has said.

Paul provides a second piece of evidence for this in verses 10-13, as he turns to Jacob and Esau

3. God’s Purpose of Election Stands: “Jacob Have I Loved, But Esau I Have Hated” (9:10-13)

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.”

One might be able to argue that God chose Isaac over Ishmael
because Isaac was the son of the free woman,
and Ishmael was the son of the slave woman.

But Jacob and Esau were twins!

The same father – the same mother – and yet before they were born
God told Rebekah, “the older will serve the younger.”

Paul says that this had nothing to do with works.

Some have said that God foresees our faith and good deeds,
and so God chooses based on his foresight.

But that is not what Paul says.

If God chooses you based on what he knows that you will do,
then his choice is based on works.

And that would overthrow the whole point of what Paul is saying here.
Paul's point is that God's choice is not based on works,
but on "him who calls."

God's call comes *first*.

This was Paul's point back in Romans 8:28-30.

"We know that for those who love God all things work together for good,
for those who are called according to his purpose."

Paul's final quote moves outside of the book of Genesis –
all the way to the book of Malachi.

As it is written,

"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Malachi was speaking after the restoration from exile.

The temple had been rebuilt – but Israel was only partly restored.

And Malachi spoke to the people of God:

I have loved you, says the LORD.

But you say, How have you loved us?

[You sent us into exile – and this restoration is only in part!

How is this evidence of your "love"?]

Is not Esau Jacob's brother? declares the LORD.

Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.

I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to the jackals of the desert.

And God declares that his anger will be against Esau forever.

God's love is evidenced for Jacob

in that he has not destroyed Israel!

500 years later Paul connects these texts.

He realizes that God's purposes in history are bigger than just one person.

Jacob and Esau were twin brothers –

and yet before either of them had done anything good or evil,

"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Israel needs to understand that God's love for them is not based on their performance.

It is based on his call – his word – his promise.

Perhaps you have heard the saying, "hate the sin, love the sinner."

That is not the way that God treats Esau.
Esau hadn't sinned yet!
And yet by virtue of his being born in Adam he was a sinner!
It would be better to say "love the man, hate the sinner."
Insofar as a person is created in the image of God, we love him –
because we see the good handiwork of God in him.
But insofar as a person is corrupted by sin and rebels against God, we hate him –
because he has corrupted that which we love!
As Augustine put it:
"God does not hate Esau the man, but he does hate Esau the sinner."

And we cannot love what God hates!
"Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?" the Psalmist asks. (Psalm 139:21)

Conclusion:

The best way to conclude is with the question Paul uses to transition to his next point:

What shall we say then?

Is there injustice on God's part?

Is it fair for God to love one twin and hate the other?

Isn't this unjust?

By no means! (me genoito)

For he says to Moses,

I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,

and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

So then it depends not on human will or exertion

[literally, not of him who wills or runs]

but on God, who has mercy.

In a very real way all Paul does in these verses is establish one point:

The Word of God has not failed,

because "it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God,
but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."

This is why we do not assume that every baptized child is automatically elect.

As we will see in coming weeks,

this is why we call everyone to repentance and faith *every week*.

Because Paul will say in chapter 10

"if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord

and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,
you will be saved."