

B. God's Promise to Israel (9:6-29)

Paul's gospel was centered in Christological promise-fulfillment. That is to say, Christ's person and work stand as the focal point of history, such that everything that preceded His coming and redemption portrayed and pointed toward the "Christ event," and everything subsequent to it presupposes it and bears the fruit of it. *This means that all of reality in the post-Calvary age must be understood and interacted with in terms of the all-encompassing principle of fulfillment and renewal instituted by Jesus' work of redemption.* Christ's cross has inaugurated a new age defined by a new reality of renewal and restoration, so that the entire creation is advancing toward and living in the earnest hope of the consummation to come. That consummation is not itself a new reality, but is simply the fullness of the renewal that is present even now. Jesus' redemption has overcome death with life, and all that remains is for the *physical* creation – including the bodies of the saints – to enter into the fruitfulness of that life (8:18-25). Thus the defining characteristic of the present age is "already, but not yet." The *spirit* is alive because of righteousness, though the *body* remains under the curse of death (8:10). But in the consummation of the last day, *"the perishable will put on the imperishable, and the mortal will put on immortality."* This is why Paul insisted that the material creation *"waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God"*: it knows that the physical resurrection and glorification of the saints brings its own everlasting renewal (ref. again 8:18-23; also 1 Corinthians 15:35-58).

Paul recognized that Christ's redemption has fulfilled all things and inaugurated a new reality, with the result that he regarded everything – including the problem of Israel – in terms of Christological promise-fulfillment. This perspective and approach are evident in the first five verses of chapter nine, as Paul presented Israel as having its ultimate significance in its role as the progenitor of "the Christ according to the flesh." Like the totality of God's activity in salvation history, Israel itself found its own destiny and meaning in Jesus Christ.

1. Paul's concern in the larger context of chapters 9-11 is Israel's present and future place in God's redemptive program. Before entering upon his discussion of this matter, he first made sure that his Roman readers understood the depth and sincerity of his burden for his Jewish kinsmen. Israel's rejection of her Messiah filled his heart with sorrow, and his grief was made all the more intense because of the covenant nation's singular privilege. Among all the peoples of the earth, the Jews should have recognized and embraced Jesus Christ, for theirs were the promises regarding Him, which promises were expressed in the covenants, the adoption of sons, the glory, the Levitical system, etc. (9:1-5).
 - a. But Israel – God's beloved covenant "son" to whom He gave the promises – had missed her Messiah and so been cut off from God's blessing. The apparent implication was as unthinkable as it was staggering: *had God's word indeed failed?* Paul recognized that Israel's woeful plight would raise this question in the minds of the Roman Christians (particularly the Jewish saints among them) and he answered it definitively without even directly asking it: *It is not as though the word of God has failed* (9:6a).

Two things are important to note about this statement:

- 1) The first is that Paul's concern was specifically with God's word as it implicated the people of Israel. Often his statement is used as a proof-text for the authority, integrity, and infallibility of the Scripture as the word of God. But Paul was not arguing for the veracity of the Bible as such; his concern was with God's relationship with and stated commitment to His Old Testament covenant people.
- 2) The second observation is an extension of the first. Paul was addressing the matter of God's word to Israel, and more narrowly the divine utterance as it embodied God's promise to them (cf. 9:8-9).

Thus, when Paul asserted that God's word had not failed, he specifically meant that God had not broken his covenant promises to Israel – promises that He had articulated, developed, and reaffirmed throughout Old Testament history.

- b. But God's promises to Israel pertained to the coming of her Savior and Deliverer and the everlasting blessedness that she would inherit through Him. How, then, given the nation's rejection of Jesus Christ and its resultant cursed state (9:3), could Paul make such an assertion? Israel had not obtained what God had promised her; how could Paul insist that God's word of promise had not failed?

The answer to this dilemma is found, not in denying Israel's plight or in somehow altering or rethinking God's promises, but in recognizing that *"they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel"* (9:6b). The matter is resolved by discerning the true referents of the promises: God has not failed to keep His word of promise to Israel; it is just that the "Israel" to whom the promises were given is different than what many believed.

- c. Having made this declaration, Paul proceeded to explain it. His first point of clarification pertains to the very nature of Israel as the collective seed of Abraham. Israel had her origination in Abraham, and the nation's very existence and relationship with God were determined by its descent from him. As seen in the preceding section, when God made His covenant with Abraham, he extended it to his offspring (ref. again Genesis 13:14-17, 15:1-21). God promised Abraham that He would make him into a great nation and give his descendents the land of Canaan. He would be their God, and they would be His people. In the centuries following Abraham's death God continued to honor His promise by increasing his descendents in Egypt, eventually bringing them out and leading them into the promised land. Israel was Abraham's offspring, and so stood in the blessing of God's covenant with Him (Exodus 3:1-17, 6:1-8).

At the same time, Israel's identity, grounded in its participation in the Abrahamic Covenant, testified to a core principle embedded in God's promise to Abraham: *"Neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: 'through Isaac your descendants will be named'"* (9:7). From the beginning God made a crucial distinction with respect to His covenant with Abraham.

That point of distinction is the **promise** of God: “*It is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants*” (9:8). On the face of it, this statement appears to be straightforward, and yet it introduces very real difficulties:

- The most obvious is that, if *promise* is the point of distinction in who really is *Israel*, then how can any Jew be excluded? How does promise establish the contention that all Israel is not Israel? For all Israel *was* the recipient of the promise made to Abraham: the whole nation was delivered from Egyptian captivity as promised (Genesis 15:13-16); the whole nation was brought into formal covenant with God according to the promise to Abraham (Exodus 19:1-24:8); and, despite the death of a generation in the wilderness, God led Israel as a nation into the land of Canaan. From the beginning, the *totality* of the twelve tribes of Israel was regarded as the people of God and the recipients of the Abrahamic blessing.
- The second issue is related: how could Paul rightly set promise in contrast to *flesh*? For it was precisely Israel’s physical descent from Abraham that made the nation the recipient of God’s promise to him. Far from being set in contradistinction to fleshly descent from Abraham, the promise was *dependent* upon it. Israel’s identity and privileged status as the “son of God” – note Paul’s use of the expression “children of God” – resulted from and depended upon the nation’s physical connection to Abraham.

What, then, did Paul mean by insisting that the physical offspring of Abraham are not regarded as descendants, and therefore are not children of God? Just the opposite seems to be true. As already observed, *the answer lies in understanding the role of Israel in salvation history*; the answer lies in Christological promise-fulfillment. Only in this way can Paul’s words be reconciled with both Scripture and history; only in this way can the problem of Israel – a problem that is central to the differences between Christian theological systems – be biblically resolved.

- d. Paul located the point of distinction between ethnic Israel and “true Israel” in the contrasting principles of *promise* and *flesh*. In other words, the larger (ethnic) Israel is defined by fleshly descent from Abraham, while the other Israel is defined by participation in the covenant promise made to him. In order to explain this distinction, Paul turned to two biblical proofs, the first involving Abraham’s son **Isaac**: “*For this is the word of promise: ‘At this time I will come, and Sarah will have a son’*” (9:9).

This citation is drawn from Genesis 18, and is set in the historical context in which messengers from God appeared to Abraham and pronounced God’s determination that Sarah would conceive and deliver a son within a year (ref. 18:1-10). This context follows significantly upon the previous chapter in which God made known to Abraham that the covenant child long promised to him would come through his elderly, barren wife Sarah (Genesis 17:1-21).

Previously God had promised to Abraham a son and covenant heir from *his* own body, and Abraham and Sarah had concluded that, given Sarah's advanced years and barren condition, this son was perhaps to come through her handmaid Hagar (ref. Genesis 15:1-4, 16:1-3). Thus Abraham conceived his first son Ishmael (16:4-16). But when Ishmael was thirteen years old, God revealed that he was not the promised seed; the covenant son was to come through *Sarah* as well as Abraham. She would conceive and bear the promised child through whom kings would arise, and for this reason her name was appropriately changed from Sarai to *Sarah*, meaning "princess" (cf. Genesis 17:1-6, 15-21).

Ishmael was a son of Abraham, yet God's covenant was with Isaac, who was the promised seed. The first son was therefore merely a child of Abraham's flesh; the second was the child of the promise. And so, while it is true that the entire nation of Israel had a fleshly connection with Abraham, it was their relationship to the Abrahamic promise that distinguished them from Abraham's other progeny. As observed by Paul, the promise, not the flesh, determines who is a child of God. Paul's use of the Isaac account provides at least two crucial pieces of information:

- 1) The first is that it shows that he was using the word *promise* specifically in relation to the covenant status and blessing bestowed upon Abraham and later transferred to his offspring. Isaac was the recipient of the covenant promise made with his father; Ishmael was not.
 - 2) The second thing it contributes is the meaning Paul attached to the phrase *children of God* (which he uses synonymously with *children* in 9:7a). This expression designates the descendants of Abraham who are *participants in the covenant* God made with him. Thus Paul insisted that the "children of the flesh" are not "children of God": neither Ishmael nor Abraham's six sons through Keturah following Sarah's death were such children. They had no share in the covenant: "*through Isaac your [covenant] descendants will be named*" (ref. again 9:7; Genesis 17:15-21, 21:1-13, 25:1-6).
- e. Paul's second proof of his thesis involves **Jacob** and **Esau**, the twin sons of Isaac: "*And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac...*" (9:10).

Even as the example of Isaac served to substantiate Paul's stated distinction between flesh and promise, so the case of Jacob and Esau acts to reinforce and further develop it. It advances Paul's argumentation in several ways:

- 1) Most importantly, it establishes the principle that the promise has no basis or point of consideration in anything human; it is purely a matter of divine, sovereign choice: "*...for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger'*" (9:11-12).

In the instance of Isaac, one could reasonably conclude that he was the recipient of the covenant promise and blessing because he was the son of Abraham's wife Sarah and not her Egyptian handmaid. The wife of the covenant patriarch is a more natural choice to conceive the covenant child. Thus, the maternal distinction between Isaac and Ishmael – though not directly implicating them as individuals – nonetheless provides a *human* basis for God's choice of the one over the other.

But the case of Esau and Jacob strips away the possibility of a human contribution or consideration in the reception of the promise. For no such maternal distinction existed between Esau and Jacob. Both were conceived at the same time in the same womb, and both shared the same covenant father and grandfather. Moreover, Paul was careful to note that God determined which son would receive the promise of the covenant before the twins were even born and had the opportunity to distinguish themselves in any way (ref. Genesis 25:19-24). God's choice was "*not because of works, but because of Him who calls*" (9:11). In fact, the only thing that brought preeminence to the one twin – namely, his birthright as the first-born – was set aside by God in bestowing the covenant promise: "*The older will serve the younger*" (9:12; Genesis 25:23).

All of these circumstances prove Paul's contention that the obtainment of the promise is solely a matter of divine prerogative. It is independent of – and even despite – human significance. Flesh and divine promise must not be confused in God's economy. God's choice is purely a matter of His own determination toward the accomplishment of His sovereign purpose. Human contribution, whether good or bad, innate or active, plays no role in His election. In truth, it could not be otherwise:

"If God's plan depended on the vagaries of sinful human beings for its continuance, then, indeed, God's 'word' would have fallen to the ground long ago. But God's purpose in history is fulfilled because he himself 'elects' people to be part of that purpose." (Douglas Moo)

- 2) Secondly, the example of Jacob and Esau introduces the principles of love and hate into the matter of the promise (9:13). Paul's citation is from the opening section of Malachi's prophecy (1:1-3), and this Old Testament context provides important insight into his present argument. In context, God was finding fault with Israel for her grievous unfaithfulness to Him. The point of emphasis in Malachi is the stark contrast between God's commitment and conduct with respect to His covenant and those of His people. This contrast is unfolded and developed by means of an interchange between God and Israel grounded in a series of rhetorical questions and responses. This dialogue forms the literary structure of the prophecy and reveals the scope and severity of Israel's rebellion. The first such question/answer context lays the foundation for the whole book.

In this passage Yahweh affirms through His prophet His love for Israel, and He uses His declaration as the occasion for exposing Israel's lack of love for Him, as expressed by their skepticism: "*How have you loved us?*" It is Yahweh's response to this question that Paul drew upon here in Romans: *How have I loved you? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau.*

The context for this pronouncement is crucial, for it prevents the sorts of speculation and unbiblical conclusions so commonly associated with the topic of God's love and hate.

- God's statement of His *love* for Israel is the declaration of His election of the nation and His covenant commitment to it. Thus when Israel questions Yahweh's stated love for her, He substantiated His contention by noting how, from the beginning, He distinguished Jacob (and so also his descendents) from his twin brother Esau. *God's love for Israel is evident in and expressed through His sovereign choice of Jacob over Esau.*
- Conversely, Yahweh's refusal to bestow covenant sonship and privilege upon Esau constituted His *hatred* for him. God did not hate Esau in the human sense of a negative emotion, nor was His hatred a rejection of Esau because of something in the man. Just as God loved Jacob before he had been born or had done anything good or bad, so also it was the case with His hatred of Esau. Esau had done nothing to deserve or provoke God's hatred.

In the Malachi context love and hate are *covenantal* terms, indicating the presence or absence of a covenant relationship with God. This sense is consistent with the balance of the Old Testament witness. Following the Exodus God equated His singular love for Israel with His taking them to be His unique, chosen covenant people (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). And since God's love for Israel consisted in His entering into covenant union with them, their rebellion against His covenant would later cause His love to turn to the hatred that is rejection (cf. Jeremiah 12:1-8; Hosea 9:1-17).

Israel's unbelief and rejection aside, in the first instance God's covenantal hatred cannot be *ascribed* to human attitudes and conduct. But it is *vindicated* by those attitudes and conduct. Esau was refused the covenant promise purely on the basis of God's determination (Genesis 25:19-23), and yet in the outworking of Esau's life he showed himself to be a man who despised his birthright and willfully rejected the privileges belonging to the first-born son of his covenant father. God's purposes in election would stand, but Esau was unaware of the Lord's secret counsel. By himself and for his own reasons, Esau fulfilled the very thing God had predetermined (cf. Genesis 25:27-34 and Hebrews 12:15-17).

Jacob and Esau were individuals, but they also represent the nations descended from them. For this reason many scholars conclude that Paul was here referring to these national entities rather than the individual men. Often this conclusion seems to be influenced by the obvious difficulties that attend the consideration of God's love and hate as they are directed toward people. By assigning the names *Jacob* and *Esau* to their national descendents, a couple of goals are achieved:

- The first is the preservation of the conviction that God loves all men. By letting the names Jacob and Esau denote national entities, God's love for all individual persons can be upheld. For in this scheme, God's hatred of Esau amounts to His disfavor toward the nation descended from him.
- The second is related to the first, namely that the ideas of love and hate are thereby limited to *covenant privilege* in God's purposes, rather than being associated with personal *spiritual salvation*. In other words, the statement, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated," says nothing about a person's salvation, but simply refers to national Israel's unique place and privilege in the outworking of God's purposes in history.

In truth, the Malachi context does support this conclusion. God's love for Jacob clearly refers to His relationship with the nation of Israel descended from Him. His love for *Israel* is proven by His assertion that He has loved *Jacob* (1:1-2). So also God's hatred for *Esau* speaks to His rejection of his descendants, namely *Edom* (1:3-4). It is also true that, in the Old Testament, God's love for Israel had no reference to the spiritual salvation of individual Israelites. Israel, the covenant nation, was God's beloved son; He had chosen to put His love upon Israel as a collective entity: the nation was elect; the nation was blessed with the Abrahamic promise; the nation was cast away when the people rebelled against the covenant.

But it is clear that Paul was referring to Jacob and Esau as individuals. Moreover, he was addressing salvation matters rather than national election and privilege. The whole of Romans 9-11 is concerned with the spiritual outcome for Israel resulting from the Jews' rejection of Christ and His gospel. Given that Malachi was addressing God's national, theocratic love for Israel and not salvation issues, *in what sense was Paul using this passage in support of his present argument?*

This dilemma is closely related to the previous one: throughout these verses Paul has been using Old Testament contexts that link God's promise with physical descent from Abraham in order to prove the *distinction* between flesh and promise. The status of Isaac, Jacob, and their descendents as "sons" of God and recipients of the promise was inseparable from their physical connection with Abraham. Similarly, God's declaration of love in Malachi pertains to Abraham's physical descendents, and does not refer to spiritual salvation. This being the case, it certainly appears that either Paul was misusing these Old Testament texts, or he was not actually speaking of salvation issues in this section of Romans. Again, the resolution lies in understanding Israel's role in salvation history.

Only then can one discern how Paul could use Old Testament passages pertaining to the collective, elect nation of Israel to prove his thesis that “not all Israel is Israel.”

- a) In the context of the Old Testament people of God, the Abrahamic Covenant and its promises did not belong to Ishmael or Esau, but to Isaac and Jacob. The passages Paul cited attest to this. But Israel was descended from the covenant patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, and so the twelve tribes that constituted Israel were included in the covenant with Abraham. They were physical offspring, but they were also covenant offspring who shared in God’s promise to Abraham.
- b) But it is crucial to recognize that national Israel’s relation to the Abrahamic Covenant was **typological**. That is to say, God’s covenant promises to Abraham and his seed found their *first-level* fulfillment in his physical offspring. At the typological level, the entire nation of Israel constituted the *physical* covenant people of God, and so all Israel was the possessor of the Abrahamic promise. This reality is reflected in the Old Testament, including the contexts Paul drew from.
- c) Israel represented the typological fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. But for this very reason, the nation was *prophetic* and therefore anticipated an ultimate, anti-typical fulfillment. Like all type/antitype relationships in the Bible, the physical/temporal type finds its fulfillment in a corresponding spiritual/eternal antitype connected in some way with the person and/or work of Christ. This is the key to understanding Paul’s argumentation: *at the level of the ultimate spiritual significance of God’s promise to Abraham, not all Israel is Israel*.
- d) In the Galatian epistle particularly Paul shows how the promises attached to God’s covenant with Abraham had their ultimate referent in Jesus Christ (3:16). At the level of typological fulfillment, the promises pertained to Abraham’s covenant offspring, namely Isaac, Jacob, and the nation of Israel descended from them. Israel was the covenant son of Abraham, but Israel was to find its own fulfillment in another Israel; a singular son of Abraham. Jesus Christ – descendant of Abraham – is the true Israel (Isaiah 49:1ff). Because the promise ultimately had reference to Him, it does not finally pertain to Abraham’s physical offspring per se, but to the offspring who belong to the true Son of promise (3:23-29).

Paul well understood national Israel’s role and significance in salvation history. He recognized Israel’s destiny in relation to Christ. This is why Paul could use Israel’s own origin and history to affirm the truth that it is the children of the promise who are children of God, and not the children of the flesh (9:6-8). From the beginning God was bearing witness to this by sovereignly making a distinction among Abraham’s offspring. They were all children of the flesh, but only Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel were children of the promise. This principle would later find its own fulfillment in relation to the One who fulfills all things: *belonging to the singular Son of the promise would constitute the sole basis for the children of the flesh (Abraham’s physical offspring) being regarded as children of the promise (Abraham’s spiritual offspring)*. In the fullness of the times, Jewish rejection of Abraham’s Son had thus proven that all Israel is not Israel.