

Not All Who Are Of Israel, Are Israel

Romans 9:6-13

God loves his visible Church. And so should we. With the calling of Abraham, God established a visible Church in the world. Throughout OT history, there was a visible distinction between God's holy people and the rest of the unbelieving world. This distinction was put in place at the command of God and was visibly marked by the sign of circumcision.

There are many good and wise reasons for God's establishing a visible people in this world. But there was also a necessary danger attached to having a visible Church.

What is that danger? It is the ease with which members of the visible Church assume that genuine salvation has occurred within their soul.

God continues to shepherd over his visible Church today. Before Jesus ascended up into heaven, he commanded his apostles to make disciples of all nations. The visible Church was to carry on through their ministry. And the boundaries of that visible Church were to be marked, no longer by circumcision, but from then on by the sacrament of baptism. Baptism, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, marks a person as belonging to God, as a member of His holy family.

But the same propensity to assume that all those within the visible Church have and are experiencing genuine salvation continues.

Last week we looked at Paul's anguish over the unbelief of his fellow Israelites. Nothing that Paul argues today prevents him from feeling this agony. But, in his sorrow, he has found a path forward such that he is able to continue trusting the Word of God for himself. And, as we will eventually see in the coming weeks, the truth of God will enable Paul to continue holding out hope for the salvation of his fellow Jews. This same path of hope continues to apply to us today.

Read Romans 9:6-13.

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed.

Isaiah 55:10-11 ¹⁰ "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

If it could be shown that God had promised to save someone and yet fail to follow through and actually save that person, then the very foundation of all faith would be lost.

The specific promise of Jesus Christ is this:

John 6:40 ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

God gave promises to his OT visible Church. And his faithfulness to those promises are inseparably joined to Jesus' word in John 6. If one falls, then the other is fallible. Either God is faithful to keep his word, or He is not.

As Paul makes a case for God's faithfulness to keep his word to Israel, remember that it is your faith with which he is concerned. As we wrestle with difficult doctrines, never lose sight of the fact that Paul wants you to actively trust in God's Word. It is God's desire that we grab hold of his promise to save and never let go. It may feel like you are riding a bucking bronco at times, but abiding in God's Word defines who are truly saved.

Our first point is that God has always had a Church within his Church.

This was true in God's OT church as we will see. But it continues in his NT Church. And will continue until the Judgment when Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. Only in eternity will every member of the visible Church be fully and completely redeemed in every sense of the term.

Until then, no matter what we do, no matter how careful we might be, there will always be a Church within the Church. This is not something that we have decided must be true, because we experience it today. It is true because God has told us it is true in his Word.

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel. It is plain to see here Paul's point. God has a people. They are called Israel. But not all who are "of" Israel, are Israel.

Defining Israel is always a challenge. Many simply want to define her as the ethnic descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is certainly true that biological children were included in Israel. But I maintain that it is more consistent with Scripture to draw the boundaries of Israel religiously. Those who had submitted to the covenant sign of circumcision. Israelites were "the circumcised".

It is the covenant sign of circumcision that outwardly distinguished Israel from the Gentile world.

Turn with me back to Genesis 17.

Genesis 17:9-14 ⁹ And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Circumcision was the sign of being in covenant relationship with God. And, if any ethnic Jew were to reject this sign, he would be cut off from the visible Church.

Certainly, circumcision was done “in the flesh.” But it was done so at the command of God. It is so important to see that the human side of religion was not something that man came up with in opposition to the spiritual side of religion. So many people reject the visible Church today in search of a pure spirituality. Their search is futile. And it goes directly against the fact that it is God who establishes the visible Church – not men.

Look back a few verses and you will see how the covenant sign was connected to God’s covenant promises.

Genesis 17:4-8 ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram,¹ but your name shall be Abraham,² for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

The promises involve:

A People.

A Land.

A Relationship with God.

God’s promises are given to Abraham personally. But they are also given to his “offspring”. Understanding what God means when he says “offspring” is a bit tricky.

The Hebrew word, “zarah”, is simple enough. It means seed or offspring. It is in the singular, meaning that it could refer to one individual “offspring” or child. Or it could refer to the “offspring” collectively, taken as a whole. All of Abraham’s children, viewed as a whole, are his offspring.

Paul explains the significance of the singular in that the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham is realized in the one Messiah: Jesus Christ.

^{ESV} **Galatians 3:16** Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.

God sends Jesus into the world in fulfillment of his promise to Abraham. So, God is only able to make promises of salvation to Abraham because of the person and work of Jesus Christ. God only makes any promise of blessing to anyone because of Jesus' perfect life, and sacrificial death on the cross, in their behalf.

If you want God's blessing of salvation, look to Jesus, cast yourself upon him, surrender to him and believe what he has done for you. Salvation comes through faith alone in Christ alone. That being said, it is impossible to look at the whole of God's word to Abraham in Genesis 17 and think that all that was promised to him was Jesus. Abraham is promised to be the father of a multitude of nations. That is more than one person, a lot more.

So, God promises to Abraham "many children". Clearly, in our own context, the biological children must be our starting point. You cannot read the Bible without feeling the importance of biological children connected to the promises of redemption.

In Genesis 17, God gives the covenant sign of circumcision and commands Abraham to apply it to his children. And the implication is that each successive generation ought to give the covenant sign to their children as well. In fact, all of the biblical covenants of salvation in some way include children. Abraham saw in Isaac's birth God's faithfulness to his promises. Isaac, in turn, saw God's faithfulness to these same promises in the birth of Jacob and Esau. Physical children matter to God and are commanded by God to be given the sign of the covenant.

So, we begin thinking about Abraham's offspring to mean his physical children. But from the very beginning God begins to make clear that "Abraham's offspring" does not include all of Abraham's biological offspring. On the one hand, children are members of the Church, but on the other

hand, they may not be. If that is confusing, I can only tell you that you are not alone.

Let's go back to Romans 9:7.

7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring,
but

"Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

8 This means that it is not
the children of the flesh who are the children of God,
but
the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

9 For this is what the promise said:

"About this time next year

I will return

and Sarah shall have a son."

Paul's statement in verse 6, "not all who are of Israel, are Israel" is essentially the same as his statement in verse 7, "Not all who are children of Abraham, are children of Abraham."

Children and Offspring are different Greek words, but they are synonyms – they essentially have the same meaning. That being said, Paul continues to establish point that God always maintains a Church within His Church.

So, we must ask...

What is it that distinguishes the inner children of Abraham, who are indeed "children of God" from those who are outward children of Abraham, but not truly children of God?

This is the second point of this sermon:

Only God's supernatural work in the soul will ever bring anyone to become a true child of God

God commanded that the sign of circumcision be given to all of his children. The fact that Abraham gives the sign to both Ishmael and Isaac makes this clear.

But if you remember the story, Ishmael was the offspring of Abraham and Hagar. And Isaac was the offspring of Abraham and Sarah. Later on, years after Ishmael has been circumcised, God clearly tells Abraham that Ishmael is NOT the one “through whom his offspring shall be named.” It is through Isaac that the promises would come. And it was Isaac who would experience the blessings of true redemption.

God makes this distinction, not because of the race of Hagar or the race of Sarah. Paul tells us the distinction.

Ishmael was a child of the flesh. And Isaac was a child of the promise. If child of the flesh means “physical child”, then both children were children of the flesh of Abraham. The contrast is not one of biology, but between human effort and divine effort.

Ishmael was the fruit of Abraham attempting to bring about the promise in his own effort, through his own ingenuity and the strength of his own will. While Isaac was the result of God keeping his promise, supernaturally. Rather than trusting God’s promise, Abraham and Sarah were trusting in their own strength and ability. That is why they come up with Hagar as the solution.

But human strength and ability will never result in the fulfillment of the promise. Instead, Paul reminds us that Isaac is conceived as the result of God’s supernatural work. He says, “I will return this time next year.” Sarah was humanly unable to bear children. She was 90 years old and past the age of child bearing. God had to supernaturally work.

We are not to see this as an isolated event, but rather one that establishes a principle for all ages.

Man cannot produce true redemption in the heart. Only a supernatural work of God in keeping his promise can produce true redemption.

I would guess that there is not one person in this room who has ever really believed that salvation occurs simply by having kids. Physical descent does not guarantee redemption. In this we have been taught well.

But, how many of us still believe that if we raise our children right, and teach them all the right things, and pray in all the right ways, that we can guarantee the salvation of our children?

When we think this way, we are following Abraham and Sarah's human wisdom. We are wrongly believing that we can manufacture salvation in the heart.

It is this attitude that first lived in Abraham and Sarah that needs to be confronted in our own hearts. As Christian parents, we are given duties by God. And to neglect them is disobedience to God's command. But we must never think that by doing these things we can ever bring about true redemption. Only a supernatural work of God can bring about the new birth in the heart of our children. It humbles us as parents to recognize this.

When God does his supernatural work, he often uses us as his hands. But God's work is never dependent on our work. And this brings us to the third point of this sermon, and it is the point that is most difficult for us to embrace:

God always reserves the right to freely choose in whom he will supernaturally work to save.

Again, this is not the conclusion of human insight. This is the undeniable revelation of the Word of God.

We may not like it. We may struggle against it. We may try to change it. We may even try to explain it away. But in the end, all our efforts must fail.

It is in God's very nature as God to be sovereign. Nothing can change that. To try to make a case that God gives up some of his sovereignty in giving humans freedom is foolish and goes directly against God's Word.

As members of the covenant, we are obligated to trust in God's promises to save ourselves from sin. And we are to plead with God to do this same work in others, especially our children.

But in our prayers, we are never to think that God's sovereign will is removed.

As I pray for unbelievers, I believe that he will use my prayers to save. That somehow my prayers fit into his sovereign plan. Maybe even that I am praying because God has sovereignly moved me to pray. But my prayers are not the first cause of another person's salvation. I am only a link in the chain that God is using. He is always the first cause.

There is much mystery here. Doug Kelly wrote an excellent book: If God already knows, why pray? I recommend it to you. God's sovereignty is not fatalism: that is the view that human choices are entirely meaningless. Men are responsible. And our choices have significance.

Yet, God always reserves the right to freely choose in whom he will supernaturally work to save. God reveals this very early in the Covenant – specifically to Isaac and Rebecca. Isaac may be the one through whom Abraham's offspring would be named. But Isaac would have to learn that he could not control the covenant promises either.

Look now at Romans 9:10-13.

10 And not only so,
but also
 when Rebecca had conceived children
 by one man,
 our forefather Isaac,
11 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 his call -
12 she was told,
 "The older will serve the younger."
13 As it is written,
 "Jacob I loved,
 but
 Esau I hated."

The older I get, the more I am amazed at the way God uses His providence, combined with his Word, to reveal the mysteries of salvation.

This is the first case in Scripture of twins. Rebecca must have wondered, “What is going on inside of me?” We look at twins as a random anomaly. But there was nothing random about Rebecca bearing twins. God wanted to teach her, and us, a lesson about salvation.

We know that God is the one making the point because he is the one who speaks to Rebecca. He did not have to do this. He could have kept his sovereign will to himself. But he does not. He comes to Rebecca while her children were still in her womb. And he tells her explicitly, “The older will serve the younger.”

You will hear from many in our day that because God is everywhere in time that He simply saw into the future and said what would happen based upon the free choices of men. There are so many problems with this sort of reasoning. But just look again at the wording. Timing is everything, both in the story itself, and in Paul’s interpretation of the events.

It was before they were born that God speaks to Rebecca. It was before the twins had done anything good or bad. And all of this was in order that God’s purpose in election might stand.

God’s choice precedes any choices that we humans make. Paul calls these choices “works”. And he explicitly teaches that salvation is “not because of works”.

That is the point. God’s election is entirely “unconditional.”

God does not move to save the less sinful.

God does not move to save the ones who do some good.

God does not even move to save because you have good parents.

Although, I would say that God often works through families to save.

God’s choice of when to exercise his Supernatural power to save is based upon God’s election alone.

And his election has nothing whatsoever to do with who we are, or will be.

God is entirely free to save whom He wants to save.

In fact, grace, for it to truly be grace, must be free.

If God is bound to save by anything outside of himself, then salvation is not of grace.

If God was not free to not save you, then his saving you was not entirely of grace.

God always freely chooses to whom he will direct his saving love. In Romans 9:13, Paul quotes from the last book of the OT, the book of Malachi. There, God is helping his people to understand that even though they have been just as sinful as the descendants of Esau, God has treated them very differently than the descendants of Esau. And even though they have been disciplined very severely by God, he has not destroyed them entirely. God, because of his covenant love, has maintained a remnant for himself and continues to carry forward his covenant promises for Israel.

In this context, Malachi, and Paul, are brought to the conclusion that when God spoke to Rebecca, it was more than a statement of fact. God was sovereignly directing his covenant love towards Jacob, and not towards Esau.

Jacob I loved. Esau I hated.

The concept of hate used in this context is one of comparison.

Hate here means to “love less”.

We can see this clearly in the book of Genesis.

Genesis 29:30-31 ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. ³¹ When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

So, there is biblical warrant for understanding “hate” in some cases, to mean “love less.” I believe that is the best way to understand the statement: Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.

We should not conclude that God had no affection towards Esau. Esau was also made in God’s image. Esau was a child of Isaac and Rebecca. He was even given the sign of the covenant distinguishing him

from the world. But when it comes to one's eternal salvation, God has the right to direct his saving love towards one and not another, even within the visible Church.

God does not have to save anyone. And when He does save he is pouring out a special, saving love that far exceeds any affection he directs towards those who are not eternally saved.

Paul understands that this truth will raise objections in his hearers. In the following verses he deals with two important objections.

At first, I intended to walk through these objections. But I decided to not do so today. You can read his answers this week for yourself. I will deal with them next week.

For now, we need to reemphasize Paul's three main points:

1. God has always had a Church within his Church
2. Only God's supernatural work in the soul will ever bring anyone to become a true child of God.
3. God always reserves the right to freely choose in whom he will supernaturally work to save.

Although, the Bible does talk about qualities and evidences that mark the person who is truly saved, only God sees the heart. And because of this we must all await the Judgment Day when God, according to his omniscience, will separate the sheep from the goats.

I am not sure if this illustration will work for you, but it was helpful to me. I was swimming laps in my pool this week, and pondering this sermon. And I began to see that it was in some ways like the water in which I was swimming. The concrete walls of the pool distinguished the pool from all that was outside of the pool. They represent the God-ordained barriers of the visible Church. Baptism distinguishes us from the world. But try as I might, I could not distinguish any inner lines between those who were truly God's children from those who were only outwardly connected to the covenant. It was just one body of water.

Some water might splash out of the pool. That happened as the Veasey girls were doing canon balls into the pool. In clear cases of rebellion and apostasy, the Church is to exercise discipline and even to cut people off from the visible Church. But so many other cases are not so clear.

And more water could enter into the pool. I have an automatic filler that keeps the pool at the proper level. But actually separating out true water from false water would have to wait for the Judgment Day.

We are not so much to be judging others as we are to be challenging our own hearts as to whether or not we are truly Christ's disciples.

Listen to Jesus' own words in the book of John:

John 8:30-32 ³⁰ As he was saying these things, many believed in him. (Outward professions of faith) ³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Even if you draw the lines of the pool at the point of initial belief, Jesus says that there is still a pool within the pool.

Not all who are of the believers, are believers.

Not all who are of the disciples, are disciples. (Judas Iscariot)

Those who remain in my word, you are truly my disciples.

So, do not comfort yourself that you are ready for eternity simply because you are a member of the visible Church. Abide in Christ's word. Continue to cling to Jesus. Continue to look to him for that supernatural work of God in your heart that you cannot produce on your own.

Secondly, continually remind yourself that God must work supernaturally for you to be saved. This is true at the beginning of salvation. But it is just as true for every step of sanctification.

Galatians 3:2-3 ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by¹ the flesh?

Every step towards glory that we make is made by supernatural grace.

John makes clear that becoming a child of God is a supernatural act of God:

John 1:12-13 ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ who were born, **not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**

It is so easy to think that our discipline, our strength of will, our good upbringing is what brings about salvation. We must constantly humble ourselves and acknowledge that it is only by supernatural grace that we are being saved.

And, lastly, we must submit to the fact that God did not choose us for any good in us.

And that when God saves those we love, it is also not for any good in them, or any good in us.

God saves because of free grace, and free grace alone.

Let me close with Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

“I have my own opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel if we do not preach justification by faith without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing unchangeable eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross. (Autobiography: 1, The Early Years, p. 168)

Amen!

