

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part twenty-three

Sunday, April 7th, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2121

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE MOST DIFFICULT CHAPTER IN THE BIBLE - AND WHY WE NEED TO STUDY IT

Romans 9:1-14 - "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— [2] that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. [3] 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. [4] They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. [5] To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. [6] But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [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." [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."

In his book, "*Chosen by God*," famed Calvinist **R. C. Sproul** claims the "*entire edifice of Arminian [free-will] theology is destroyed by the single verse - 'So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy (9:16).'*" Whether or not Sproul is right, Romans 9 is certainly the ground claimed by Calvinists of all stripes. And for good reason:

Romans 9:10-11 - "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...."

Romans 9:15-16 - "For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." [16] So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

Romans 9:17-18 - "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." [18] So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

Romans 9:21-22 - "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? [22] What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction...."

And there are others, but you get my point. These verses have given rise to a whole system of Scriptural interpretation, held by many devout brothers and sisters in Christ, that sees God almost randomly pre-selecting people both for eternal life and eternal damnation. Many Christians find the doctrine of **unconditional election** obviously taught, and, quite understandably, this chapter, more than any other portion of Scripture, is the one used to reinforce their doctrine.

All of this gives rise to the key question in studying this chapter. **Why** is it here? Many commentaries treat chapters 9 through 11 as a kind of parentheses in which Paul leaves his previous thoughts and launches into a discussion on the plight and future of the nation of Israel. And if that's the whole truth of the matter, then it's easy to conclude it teaches this kind of unconditional election - or **selection** - of the eternal state of individuals either to eternal life or eternal damnation long before they are born.

I want to try to go down a very different path. And I do so with honest humility. This may take several weeks.

1) THE PURPOSE OF PAUL'S TEACHING ON ISRAEL IN THESE CHAPTERS ISN'T A DEPARTURE FROM HIS TEACHING AT THE END OF ROMANS CHAPTER EIGHT

I suppose we might as well start right at the beginning:

Romans 9:1-6a - "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— [2] that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. [3] 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. [4] They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. [5] To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. [6] But it is not as though the word of God has failed....”

There it is - right in that last phrase - **“But it is not as though the word of God has failed....”**(6a). This is Paul’s primary concern and **motive** behind everything he’s going to write in chapters 9 through 11. He has just made some very sweeping promises to the Christians at Rome regarding their safety in Christ Jesus - **Romans 8:38-39** - **“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Right on the heels of that great promise he bemoans the present state of his own people - the Jews. After receiving so many blessings and benefits from God, they have departed from their call and failed so miserably. Paul actually says he would **trade places with them**. He would offer himself to be **“accursed and cut off from Christ”** (9:3) if that would bring his people, the Jews, back to God. So we know Paul **must** have seen the situation of the Jews as a bleak one indeed. He says he would rather be **“cut off”** from Christ because that’s how he saw his own people - **“cut off”** from Christ. Otherwise, Paul’s words make no sense.

Keep that in mind. Paul sees these ethnic Jews as **“cut off from Christ.”** And most of them had never seen or heard Christ ever. That’s a key point for interpreting this entire chapter. If these Jews were going to **not** be cut off from Christ they would have to make the same response to the bare promise of God that Abraham himself had to place faith in order to be justified. Abraham wasn’t justified by **election**. He was justified by **faith**.

Back to our text. Paul knows he has some explaining to do. If God had made a **covenant** with the Jews - if He had **promised** to be with them and to be their God - and if they were now **“cut off from Christ”** - then how could **any** of God’s promises be trusted? If the Jews - who were so constantly called **“God’s chosen people”** - if **they** could slip away from Christ, then what about all those wonderful words addressed to **Christians** in **Romans 8:38-39**? **This** is the issue of chapters nine through eleven. It has everything to do with you and me.

2) IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THE REASON PAUL SAYS GOD’S PROMISE TO ISRAEL HASN’T FAILED

He starts out his whole argument with statements that are as clear as he can possibly make them. Nothing in these three chapters makes any sense until one firm truth is settled in our minds: **Romans 9:6-8** - **“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [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.”**

This is very clear. Paul says if you look at the Jews **as a whole** it looks as though the promise of God to keep a people has failed. If you take **Israel** to mean **all** of the physical descendants of Abraham you will think the promise of God hasn’t stood firm because **many** Jews have rejected Christ and have died without faith. But, while God **did** make an eternal covenant with Israel, he **didn’t** include **all** who were Abraham’s offspring. This is the whole point of these verses and nothing is more important to remember as we think through these chapters.

3) THE EXAMPLES OF ISAAC, ISHMAEL, JACOB AND ESAU AND THEIR PURPOSE IN PAUL’S EXPLANATION

Romans 9:7-13 - **“....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. [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 [remember that phrase] 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.”**

Paul is continuing now to unpack this idea of God’s promise for Israel still standing. His promise didn’t fail when properly understood. The Jewish people, taken **as a whole**, may have forsaken Christ and forsaken their calling.

But God's promise **never was** to Israel **as a whole**. God's ultimate promise would be fulfilled only for the **Israel of faith** - or, as Paul would put it, only the **remnant** within Israel, the **"children of promise"**(9:8). That means entrance into this covenant was by placing faith in divine promise. Paul simply insists on this.

To prove this wasn't some new or novel idea, Paul goes right back into Jewish history as recorded in their Scriptures. Abraham had more than one child. Paul describes the history of the birth of **two** of Abraham's sons. First, Paul describes the birth of **Ishmael** through **Hagar**, Sarah's handmaiden. Then he describes the birth of **Isaac** through Abraham's aged wife **Sarah** (9:7-9).

Paul cites these two first examples as proof of his initial, driving proposition that not all of Abraham's children are members of God's Israel. That's why **Hagar's** offspring, **Ishmael** and his seed, are called **"children of the flesh"**(8), while **Sarah's** offspring, **Isaac** and his seed, are called the **"children of promise"**(8-9).

This distinction is a key to understanding everything important in this difficult chapter. We are **meant** to ask the question. **"Why does God accept the seed of Isaac and not the seed of Ishmael?"** Is it because one has Abraham as his father and the other doesn't?

No. That's not it at all. They are **both** descendants of **Abraham**. Yet, they are not both **Israel** in its fullest sense. **Why?** There is only one answer to that question and it has everything to do with a phrase I asked you to remember a little earlier tonight. **Isaac** is the one through whom God's blessing will come in order that **"God's purpose of election might continue...."**(9:11).

And God's purpose in election was to demonstrate that redemption was through trust in divine promise. God wants that purpose to continue.

It's not that Isaac was a better person than Ishmael. Rather, Ishmael is called a **"child of the flesh"** (9:8) because he was the product of what Abraham could accomplish **on his own without any special intervention from God**. And that's not how God was going to produce salvation through His ultimate Servant, Jesus Christ. God's **"purpose in election"** was to demonstrate **how He performs His saving work in this world**.

To **demonstrate** this He gave a promise to **Sarah** long after she had any ability **on her own** to give birth. This, once again, was to demonstrate God's **"purpose in election."** God's electing, delivering work would stand by **faith** in a **promise**. And it would not be the result of human work or accomplishment.

But Paul isn't finished his argument yet. "Surely," some might say, "God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael was because, while Ishmael's **father** was Abraham, his **mother** was a slave woman, an outsider." So, to counter that argument, Paul takes his logic a step further in the story of the birth of **Jacob and Esau** - **"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.'"**

For some who might be new or just a bit rusty in Old Testament history, **Isaac** grew up and married **Rebekah**. Rebekah gave birth to **twins, Jacob and Esau**. And Paul uses this example even more forcefully than the previous one of **Ishmael** and **Isaac**. It's more powerful because the loophole of the first example is closed up. Jacob and Esau have the same father **and** the same mother. More than that, they are conceived at the very same instant. In other words, it would be **impossible** to create a situation where there was **less** to differentiate between the two offspring than between **Jacob** and **Esau**.

And this is the whole point of this example. God was proving to the whole world that His electing work wouldn't stand on either of the **two foundations manifested in these two examples from Israel's own history. Isaac is the pattern over Ishmael to prove election would stand by faith in divine promise, rather than human effort. And Jacob is the pattern over Esau to show every member of the Jewish nation that election would not stand either by birth order or any other regulation of ethnic lineage.**

4) FINAL THOUGHTS AS WE WRAP UP THIS PORTION OF STUDY

- a) The Jews, right through the times of Jesus Christ, insisted on **locking up the terms of divine election on ethnic terms**. They put God in the box of their own ethnicity. John the baptist and then Jesus would come and call them to repentance and they, for the most part, refused to budge.

So often did they respond in this same fashion that, on one occasion, John stopped their objection to his preaching even before they spoke it out loud - **"Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. [9] And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. [10] Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire"**(Matthew 3:9-10).

The Jews - the descendants of Abraham - were being called to avoid eternal judgment and repent of their sins. In other words, it is assumed they **can** repent and escape damnation and judgment. But they refused, over and over, because they had **"Abraham as their father."** They made God's election - God's **eternal** election - locked into a matter of physical descent. And John said that would never stand. This is **exactly** Paul's argument with the **same Jewish mind-set** in our text from Romans chapter nine.

- b) **Many references to election in Romans 9 deal with divine assignment of responsibility, not eternal destiny.** We **know** this **must** be true because the Bible makes it vividly clear that Abraham's children can and have been eternally lost. And it tells us this in **both** the Old and New Testaments. Here are just a few examples:

Amos 9:7-10 - "Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?" declares the Lord. "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir? [8] Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob," declares the Lord. [9] "For behold, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the earth. [10] All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, 'Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.'"

Or listen to these words from the lips of Jesus, our Lord - **Matthew 8:11-12** - "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, [12] while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

These are the words of Jesus, given right after the manifestation of the great faith of the **centurion** - the **gentile** centurion. Jesus praises this man's **faith**. He gives this man **credit** for his faith. These words to show that **faith** is the condition of saving grace, not ethnicity.

To make His point even more potent Jesus reminds His Jewish audience that many **"sons of the kingdom"** (Jews) would end up in outer darkness. Take note of that. Literal descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in outer darkness.

- c) The third way we know divine election doesn't seal eternal destiny from Romans chapter 9 is the wonderful fact that those who were **not** descendants of Abraham could, nonetheless, be members of the divine covenant.

There are just too many examples to list. **Ishmael is circumcised, becoming a member of the covenant of promise (Genesis 17:25)**. Any of **Esau's descendants** could easily enter into the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. In fact, **foreigners** (Gentiles) were **invited** to join Israel (**Genesis 17:10-13**).

- d) There is one final distinction to keep in mind. There are different **kinds** of election dealt with in Romans chapter nine. The first five verses outline the **general election of all Jews as the means of bringing the Scriptures, the sacrificial system** (pointing to the saving work of Christ), and finally, **the ethnic branch of humanity through which Jesus Christ, the Messiah, would be offered to the whole world**.

In **this** general sense, **all Jews are God's elect people**. But this isn't a calling into eternal salvation. This is a giving of divine blessing and responsibility, which, unfortunately, not all Israel took seriously enough.

This election is **distinct** from Paul's teaching of the faithful remnant **among** Israel - **Romans 9:6-8** - "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [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."

Paul keeps on repeating this idea of divine promise and faith in divine promise and God's standing purpose in election by faith through promise. Once we get to Romans chapter 11 you'll find this is all Paul talks about. More on this teaching, and some of the objections Paul anticipates from the Jewish mind, next week.