

Sermon Growth Guide

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Children of the Promise | Romans 9:1-13

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Key Verse: Romans 9:8 – “In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.” (9:8)

Big Idea: The gift of eternal salvation cannot be earned by human effort, nor otherwise seized by human beings. God Himself, in His sovereignty, grants salvation to those whom He has chosen in His hidden wisdom and purposes. Our response to His electing work is seen in our humility, gratitude, embrace of the family of God, and our newfound purpose to glorify the God of sheer grace.



Foundations

After such a rousing, climactic ending of hope and praise, Paul’s mood suddenly shifts dramatically. From the assurance that nothing can separate God’s people from the love of Christ, Paul turns to the conundrum of Israel, the vast majority of whom have rejected their own Messiah despite all their spiritual advantages over against the Gentiles, and face now the rejection of God. The question that challenges all the promises made to Christians in Romans 8 is: If God made promises to Israel and yet Israel is now facing the wrath of God, what assurances do Christians have that God will prove true to His stupendous promises that He is for us, that the elect are secure in God’s love, that we are more than conquerors through Christ, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord? Paul has to answer the question of why Israel seems to be outside the saving purposes of God after the coming of Jesus.

In 9:6-13, Paul employs the doctrine of God’s electing purposes to argue that “Not all Israel is Israel;” i.e., one is not part of “true/spiritual/saved Israel” simply by having the right bloodlines. God must make a Jew “a child of promise” for that individual to become part of true Israel. This act of God’s choice demonstrates His sovereign will which moves a “child of wrath” (see Eph. 2:3) to “a child of promise/God”. No human being by his or her own will can cause this miraculous change to happen – it depends totally on the mysterious mercy of God.

Understanding God’s Word

The Jews in Paul’s day believed they were the Chosen People. How do you imagine they might have responded to Paul’s argument here that “Not all Israel is Israel”? The doctrine of election when rightly understood creates a sense of humility among God’s people (see Dt. 7:6-8; 9:5-7), but often our sinful hearts twist the truth that God loves us simply because He chooses to into a false belief that God loves us because we are in some way more lovable (or worthy of His love) than other people. How do you make sense of Paul’s statement concerning God’s choice of Jacob over Esau: “in order that God’s purpose in election might stand, not by works but by Him who calls...”? Why is the purpose of God’s election so important that it needs to be emphasized? What truth does God want to communicate to His people through His electing work?

Applying God’s Word

We How does a deeper understanding of God’s sovereign work in the realm of human salvation impact your view of evangelism? Can human beings truly choose to love and follow God by exercising their natural free will regardless of God’s electing purposes? Or is it more appropriate to say from the model of 1 John 4:19 (“We love because He first loved us”), “We choose [God] because He first chose us”? Can you think of other practical implications for our lives (beside humility) that a hearty understanding of divine election would engender?

Witnessing God’s Word

On There is no question that the doctrine of election and its sister teaching regarding predestination are potential conversation flashpoints. Are you willing to engage others in learning about these biblical teachings more deeply, or would you rather let “sleeping dogs lie”? To be honest, these are not gospel issues. One’s view on election does not impact one’s salvation. Nevertheless, God has given us deep truths in the Scriptures that are worthy of meditation and understanding. Are you willing to engage other Christians on these topics to deepen your own faith and to encourage others to expand their own sense of God’s greatness in the realm of salvation?

Two key doctrines that mark Reformed theology are predestination and election. Shrouded in mystery, they probe the deep thoughts of God as revealed in the Scriptures, and help Christians ponder the ways of God below the surface of life. Yet, not surprisingly, because their full import is difficult to grasp and sometimes controversial, preachers often skip by them.

However, today as we continue our year-long study of Romans, we begin a new 8-week series on Romans 9-11 entitled “The People of God.” Romans 9 contains without a doubt the most concentrated Scriptural teaching on the themes of election and predestination, and we open this morning with 9:1-13. Who knew the apostle Paul was a closet Presbyterian?

I’ve been looking forward to this time with you – having worked on this sermon for some 35 years and nine months, ever since Cindy and I moved over to Durham, England in 1990 with our 3 small kiddos to pursue a PhD in NT studies. My eventual thesis had the title “Paul’s Understanding and Use of the Concept of Election in Romans 9-11.” Here’s the abstract page. A full copy will be handed out to each of you here at the end of the service so you can prepare for the rest of the summer series (just kidding).

The apostle Paul was forced to deal with these mind-bending truths of election and predestination because of a quandary concerning Israel. As we saw last week at the end of Romans 8, Paul concludes his teaching on the tenacious love of God for His people who belong to Christ – “if God is for us, who can stand against us; we are more than conquerors through him who loved us; I am sure that neither death nor life...” The chapter ends with a crescendo of love, joy and hope. And then chapter 9 begins:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, 4 the people of Israel. (9:1-3)

It’s almost as if after all the applause and cheers die down at the end of Paul’s rousing speech, a critic stands up and says, “OK, Paul, great words on God’s faithful love to Christians. But God made the same kinds of promises in the OT to the Jews, and even sent them the Messiah – but look what’s happened to them. Most of them have turned their back on Jesus, and God has hardened their hearts in judgment. If God could do that to Israel, why might He not do the same to Christians in the future?”

Great question. Before I answer that, let me share with you a recent, somewhat embarrassing story. Two months ago, I headed out from home to come

to work early. My car fob and keys were in my hand as I got in the driver’s seat, and I was too lazy to wrestle them into my pants pocket so I just threw them on the front seat between my legs to ensure that I wouldn’t forget them when I arrived and got out. Sure enough, I had forgotten, but when I slid out of the seat, I heard the keys jingle. So I turned back as I stood outside the seat and reached down – but the keys weren’t on the seat. OK, I must have brushed them down to the side of the seat, or maybe into the door’s side pocket. No deal. I crouched down and checked under the driver’s seat and the front area. No luck. I looked between the seat and the front console. Nope. I crouched and looked under the car – nope. Under the car parked next to me. No. I opened the back door and looked under the front driver’s seat. No go. Now I was getting desperate. I opened all the car doors and looked everywhere in the car and couldn’t find the keys anywhere. Perhaps I’d absent-mindedly put them back in a pocket – so I patted my jacket pockets and pants pockets (front and back). Not there. How could they disappear? At the end of my rope, I patted down my whole body, arms, back, torso, legs and lastly, between my legs. Lo and behold, there they were, hanging between my legs the whole time. The key ring itself had somehow gotten hooked on the hemline at the top of the inseam of my pants and was just dangling. I’m glad it was early and no one was walking by in the parking garage as I reached down and rotated the key ring until it released from my pants.

Why do I share this story? Two reasons. First, I hope that whenever you hear of the doctrine of election in the future, it will bring a smile to your face. But the second reason is more important. That is, sometimes the key you’re looking for is the last place you’d imagine.

For Paul, the key to solving the conundrum regarding Israel’s rejection of the gospel lies in God’s purpose of election, the last place most Jews would look. After all, they were God’s chosen people, the offspring of Abraham. They had the right pedigree, the right bloodline. They knew the Law and traditions. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were their patriarchs. God must love them, for He had favored them over the Gentiles. But Paul argues in vv. 6-13 that God never promised that He would save all ethnic Israel. Through His sovereign design, God chose to save a subset of Abraham’s descendants, those who would be called “children of promise”. These constitute the true Israel of God, those who demonstrate true faith in the God of their fathers because God has turned their hearts to Himself. Not all Israel is true Israel.

This Paul demonstrates by reviewing the history of the patriarchs. In Genesis 12, God comes to a pagan man in Mesopotamia and calls him to move to a land He would show him. He promises to make of this man Abram a great nation of descendants through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. Abram obeys.

In Genesis 15 we discover that Abram's wife Sarai is barren, and he assumes that he will have to make his slave Eliezer his legal heir so that the promise of God can be fulfilled. But God says, "No, your own son will be your heir."

In Genesis 16, Abram remains childless through Sarai's barrenness, and the two decide (in a not unusual arrangement of the day) that Sarai would offer to Abram her slavegirl (an Egyptian maid named Hagar) so that she might bear him a son on her behalf. Indeed, she conceives and bears a son who will be named Ishmael. Because Abraham was trying on his own to make God's promise come true, Paul sees Ishmael as a "child of the flesh" – one whose life symbolizes human striving to produce naturally what only God can produce supernaturally.

In Genesis 17, it is now 13 years later, and God reappears to Abraham and reaffirms His covenant promise: "I have made you the father of a multitude of nations." He renames Sarai as Sarah and declares, "I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Abraham falls on his face and laughs to himself: "Right. I'm almost 100 and Sarah is almost 90. How could this be?" It will happen, God says, "and you will call the boy Isaac," which means "He laughs."

A short while later, in Genesis 18, God appears again to Abraham at his tent where He once again makes this promise of a miraculous pregnancy and birth. This time, Sarah is standing behind the tent flap and she overhears the divine promise. She too laughs, in unbelief. Who can blame her? But God's counters, "Is anything too hard for the Lord? By next spring, I will return to you, and Sarah will have a son." Genesis 21 records the Lord's return and the promised birth of Isaac. Though Abraham is understandably attached to his thirteen-year-old son Ishmael, God tells him to turn his attention to his wife Sarah and his newborn son, because "through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (21:12).

Paul uses these Genesis accounts to emphasize God's sovereignty in shaping who will be part of His chosen people. But a Jewish opponent listening to Paul might answer, "Of course God chose Isaac over Ishmael; Ishmael was a half-breed after all, born of an Egyptian slavegirl, not of Sarah, Abraham's rightful wife."

So Paul says, "Let's turn to the next generation and God's continuing work of election." Isaac now fully grown marries Rebekah. She becomes pregnant with twins. Jacob and Esau both are offspring of the same parents, so both are of the same bloodline. But even before they are born, God chooses one for His

electing purpose and not the other. Paul writes in v. 11: "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand..."

Esau is firstborn and so according to culture and law, he should receive a double portion of the inheritance and favor of the family. But in His sovereign plan, God reverses this by declaring, "The elder will serve the younger," and "Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated." On top of that Paul notes that God's election of Jacob over Esau occurs before birth, i.e., before they had done anything good or evil. In other words, God's choice had nothing to do with anything inherent in either boy, but rather rest simply in the mystery of God's sovereign plans. Verse 12 underlines that God is not making His choice on the basis of reward for works done, but rather that God in extending His call upon one life but not the other was determining the destiny of Jacob as the one through whom God's saving purposes would continue.

Perhaps at this point you're thinking, "If the salvation of all human beings is completely in the hands of God, and if He could therefore save all human beings, why doesn't He? Why are some chosen and other rejected? Why doesn't He choose all for heaven? Great question! I'd love to answer that, but Paul saves that for the second half of Romans 9, so you'll have to come back next week and Pastor Tim will make everything clear..."

I believe in the doctrine of God's sovereign election because of passages like this, and the teaching from Ephesians 2:1-5 that by nature no human being is fit for the Kingdom of God – that we are all spiritually dead in our sins and trespasses, and by nature children of wrath, with no capacity to kick start our way to the new life that only God can pour into us through His Holy Spirit. On our own steam we would never choose to surrender our lives to Jesus Christ or to love God rather than the world.

I believe this because of the Scriptural witness, but I also believe in predestination and election because I could never explain otherwise how I became a Christian. Perhaps you can relate in your own life. What are the odds that a boy born to a Syrian Muslim father, raised in the heart of fundamentalist Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, molded by Shari'a Law, then mesmerized by the world of Eastern mysticism from the age of 14 to the point of traveling to India to study classical yoga one summer at age 19 under an aged Brahmin caste guru, all the while being schooled at Stanford University in analytic Western philosophy should suddenly at age 20 do a complete reversal and become a resolute follower of Jesus Christ? If God operated on the basis of odds, my goose would have been cooked long ago

God seems to delight in taking basket cases and turning them into gift baskets. He demonstrates His glorious mercy by reversing lost causes, by taking what is dead and bringing it to new life, by rebuilding lives that have imploded. He opposes the self-sufficient and gives grace to the humble. As Paul reminded the Corinthians,

Consider your call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

Here perhaps is the key to understanding the electing purpose of God. In His sovereignty He tends to choose those individuals through whose lives He can most clearly demonstrate His glory – whether it is through His power, His mercy, His wisdom or His love.

And His electing choice always results in certain effects in the lives of the elect. Perhaps you've been wondering during this message about yourself – has God chosen me? How would I know?

Here are five quick signs of God's work in the lives of the elect:

1) Humility and Wonder – the recognition that nothing in me warrants God's mercy, that I am as prone to sin and darkness as any other person, and that given the appropriate set of circumstances, I could have turned out as Charles Manson, or Adolf Hitler or my nasty neighbor down the street. If I cannot say of another troubled human being, "There but for the grace of God go I", then I haven't yet understood the depth of my own depravity, nor the wonder of God's grace offered to make me His son or daughter.

2) Gratitude – Knowing we don't deserve any gifts from God, we receive with gratitude His manifold kindnesses. God's call upon our lives fills us with thanksgiving that He has claimed us as His own and leads us to praise Him more deeply. Augustine once said, "A Christian should be an alleluia from head to toe." As one of our great hymns declares:

Ye chosen seed of Israel's race,
Ye ransomed from the fall,
Hail Him who saves you by His grace
And crown Him Lord of all.

3) Embracing the Family of God – to be chosen as God's child is to belong to His whole family. The Christian life is not a solitary journey. We develop a love for the Church, recognizing we are meant to walk together in life. As another of our great hymns puts it,

Elect from every nation, Yet one o'er all the earth...
Or in the words of hymnwriter Bryan Jeffery Leech, "We are God's people, the chosen of the Lord". I always smile when singing a hymn of Leech's, because before my wife Cindy and I met, she had briefly dated him. I have no doubt that Bryan was chosen by the Lord, but he was not chosen by Cindy, and for that I am eternally grateful!

4) Newfound Purpose – "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why." To experience God's election in your life is to discover your why: to live for the glory of God. According to Ephesians 2:10, as a believer you are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that you should walk in them. As Christians we are to shine with the light of Jesus in a world cloaked in darkness, pointing people to His offer of love.

5) Secured Destiny – to be chosen by God is to gain assurance of your eternal destiny. You are bound for glory. As Paul wrote in 8:29-30, "You, whom God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, the he might be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters; and you, whom He predestined He also called, and you whom He called He also justified, and you whom he justified He also glorified.

If you have faith in Jesus, love for God in your heart, and the desire to live for His glory, then you may rest assured that you are one of the elect, for these cannot be generated from the fallen human heart, but are supernatural gifts from God to draw you to Himself.

If you don't yet find these qualities within you, don't despair. If you desire these gifts, that in itself is a sign that God is at work in you. Open yourself fully to Jesus Christ, and watch Him work, drawing you as a child of promise into the people of God. Amen.