

Who Chose Whom? Romans 9:1-13

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

The ninth chapter of Romans centers around the thorniest subject on which a preacher can preach: election (or, as some call it, predestination). This is a subject that is guaranteed to raise blood pressures whenever it is mentioned, so I want to begin by reminding you that the duty of Christians is to love one another even though we may disagree about matters of interpretation. This subject has brought about a major division in Protestantism between the Arminians (freewillers) and the Calvinists (sovereign election). Romans 9 deals with this subject of election, and in a sense is the test of one's theology.

It is my personal conviction that a man's salvation is caused by the grace of God and is grounded in the eternal plan of God. God elected some to salvation, according to the pleasure of his will. This is not a popular teaching in the twentieth century (an age of weak theology), but it has been the teaching of the historic church, and of a great many of its theological giants — Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, George Mueller, William Carey, David Livingstone, David Brainard, Donald Grey Barnhouse, J.I. Packer and Martin Lloyd Jones to name a few. I feel my convictions stand in line with great men of the faith. I am not ashamed to be numbered among these men!

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 9

Romans 9,10 and 11 deal specifically with the nation of Israel. Paul has shown in Romans 1-8 that sinners are saved by grace through faith in the person of Jesus Christ, and this section was directed primarily to Gentiles who had trusted Christ as personal Saviour.

Now the question arises, "What about Israel?" God chose Israel in the Old Testament and made them many wonderful promises. Is God through with Israel? What about the covenants God made with this great nation? A Jewish objection to Romans would be that either God's promises to Israel are true and Paul's gospel false, or Paul's gospel is true and God has abandoned the nation Israel. Thus, if God is not faithful in carrying out his promises to Israel, how can we be sure he will carry out the promise of salvation as set forth by Paul?

This is why Paul writes Romans 9-11, to show that God has a right to deal as he pleases with Israel. His conclusion will be that God in his sovereignty has set Israel aside because of their unbelief, but will again deal with the nation at his second coming. God is not through with Israel, but will fulfill his covenants to them.

THE SORROW OF PAUL — Romans 9:1-3

“I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsman according to the flesh.” The Apostle had such a passion to see his Jewish brethren converted that he wished (though it could not be done) that he were damned so that they would be saved. Paul had great concern for the lost condition of people who were unsaved. Paul was not anti-Semitic — he longed to see the Jews saved! And so should we.

THE PRIVILEGED POSITION OF ISRAEL — Romans 9:4-5

“Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” The Jews had all these privileges given to them, and through this great race came the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The Jews felt that these privileges and this great heritage made them automatically acceptable to God. They thought that their heritage constituted them saved individuals. Poor Israel, they actually thought that because they descended from Abraham, they were his children. But this favor of God on Israel made them bitter, proud, self-deceived, self-righteous and braggarts.

What was Israel’s problem? They did not understand the basis of salvation. The true basis or method of salvation is “by grace through faith.” If by grace, then salvation ultimately must be traced back to the elective purpose of God. Paul teaches about election to break through the Jews’ self-pride. Nothing stirs religious and self-righteous people more than the doctrine of election.

One famous expositor said there were three reasons why he preached on the doctrine of election: pride, presumption and despair. The doctrine of sovereign election cut right through the cultural pride of the Jews and laid them out as nothing before God. Nothing humiliates a person like sovereign election!

GOD’S ELECTIVE PURPOSES ARE NOT RELATED TO PHYSICAL DESCENT — Romans 9:6-9

Some feel that this section of Scripture (9:6-24) is dealing with the nation of Israel only and has nothing to do with individual salvation. There are at least three reasons that this argument falls short of the truth:

1. God's election of nations presents the same issues and problems as election of individuals, for you cannot have an elect nation without elect individuals in the nation. Also behind these nations, was the choice of God of individuals who were progenitors of these nations.
2. One might say that 9:1-13 is dealing with nations, but after 9:13 there are things that can only apply to individuals, such as the question regarding "us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles" (Rom. 9:24).
3. This is consistent with Paul's teaching on election in other places.

"Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect." God's Word had not failed, but Israel had failed. God's promises to Israel are certain. Paul is going to go back behind the rejection of Christ by Israel to the sovereign purpose of God.

"For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." In context, Paul is not talking about Gentiles but about Israel as a race and a nation. He is making a distinction between true, spiritual Israel on the one hand, and natural, physical Israel on the other hand. The difference is in the new birth! Being a son of Abraham by natural birth, a recipient of the privileges of a physical Jew, does not guarantee that one will be a spiritual son of Abraham. A distinction must be made between the spiritual and physical seed of Abraham. One becomes a spiritual seed by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

"Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children, but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called." Paul uses a biblical illustration of Isaac and Ishmael. In Genesis 15 and 17, God made a covenant with Abraham that through him the world would be blessed through the sending of Messiah, which in turn would bring salvation blessings to individuals and kingdom blessings to the world. The covenanted line would be through the line of promise. The promises of the Old Testament are to those who are Jews but also spiritual seed!

"And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed" (Gen. 21:12-13).

Ishmael was a physical seed of Abraham, but not a spiritual seed. Abraham had Ishmael through Hagar. Ishmael was outside this covenant of God. Ishmael proves that one can be a physical seed of Abraham and still not be a spiritual seed or saved.

"That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed." Not natural descent from Abraham, Jewish heritage, or culture makes one a child of God, but only the children of the promise are counted for spiritual seed. Only promised children who are in the covenant are spiritual seed because of the

new birth. And the new birth is a result of the activity of God. It is quite obvious that God chose Isaac and rejected Ishmael because Isaac was the promised seed according to God's purpose.

“For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son.” God's covenant could only be through Isaac and not Ishmael. Ishmael was never a promised child, nor was he the heir of God's covenant with Abraham. As far as we know, Ishmael was lost, even though God blessed him at times.

This section teaches that salvation is not by physical descent, but according to God's elective purposes.

GOD'S ELECTIVE PURPOSES ARE NOT BASED UPON HUMAN MERIT — Romans 9:10-13

Some critics might say that Isaac and Ishmael had different mothers, and this affected spiritual election. After all, Ishmael was an illegitimate child of Hagar, who had no rights as did Isaac. Now, Paul uses another biblical illustration of the twins Esau and Jacob — both were in the line of promise. Esau was the first born and should have received the blessing. But before they were born, God estranged the blessing and gave it to Jacob.

“And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac.” They were twins, each in line for the promise of the covenant.

“For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil.” Before the children knew right or wrong, God made a choice that Jacob would be in the line of promise and in the covenant, but that Esau would not, even though humanly Esau had a right to the place of blessing. Note that God in his sovereignty changed the destinies of the boys.

“That the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him that calleth.” God made this choice before they were born, before they could do good or evil. Why? That the purpose of God in election might stand! The spiritual seed of Abraham are God's elect according to his purpose, and no flesh can glory in his presence:

1. Neither Jacob nor Esau deserved anything from God. If one was chosen, it was the pure grace of God. God would have been just to damn both, but in his grace he chose to save one.
2. Someone might say that God saw how Jacob would believe and chose him on that basis, but this verse explicitly says God chose before they were born, and not with respect to anything good or bad in the twins!

3. Someone may say that God saw how they would turn out, and made the choice on that basis. Not so. Jacob was anything but a reputable character for most of his life. In many respects Esau was better than Jacob. Jacob was saved by the pure grace of God alone!

An illustration from Spurgeon:

One weeknight, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, "How did you come to be a Christian?" I sought the Lord. "But how did you come to seek the Lord?" The truth flashed across my mind in a moment — I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek him. I prayed, thought I; but then I asked myself, "How came I to pray?" I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. "How came I to read the Scriptures?" I did read them; but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith; and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God."

John Newton used to tell the story of the little old lady who used to say, "Ah, sir, the Lord must have loved me before I was born, or else he would not have seen anything in me to love afterwards."

"It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger." This was spoken before the two boys were born (cf. Gen. 25:23).

"As it is written Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." This quote is taken from Malachi 1:1-2, and in that context he used it in terms of nations. Apparently, Paul takes this and relates it to God's plan. This statement was made 1,000 years after God's choice of Jacob to salvation.

In the plan of God, he chose Jacob to salvation but his love or hate was not manifested until the individuals existed. God's love followed Jacob's seed, showing the reality of election, and his hate followed Esau's seed, showing the reality of rejection. Nowhere in the Bible is it hinted that Esau was saved, and there is some evidence for the fact he was never saved (Heb. 12:15-16).

If you find yourself "bucking" at this truth, you are following right along with Paul's argument. If you are crying, "God is not fair!" or "This makes us only puppets!" you have understood what Paul is saying and you are ready for the rest of his argument, to be taken up in the next lesson.

A student once said to Dr. Griffith Thomas that he was having trouble with Romans 9, for he could not understand why God hated Esau. After all, this doesn't seem fair. Dr. Thomas answered that he too was having trouble with this passage, but his problem was different. He did not understand why God loved Jacob, for no man deserves God's love.

CONCLUSION

All of us believe in the sovereignty of God, but most of us haven't thought much about it. Why were you born in America instead of Russia? Why were you born white, or yellow or black? Why are some rich and some poor? Why are some born healthy and some crippled? Why are some raised in a Christian home and others not? Why do some come under the hearing of the gospel and others never hear it? And lastly, why are you a Christian and others not? These problems can ultimately be solved only in the sovereignty of God!

Perhaps there is someone reading this that is saying, "It isn't fair for God to choose some and not others." Now I will ask you a question, "Is there anyone that wants to be a Christian, who wishes to leave sin and walk with Christ?" If you do, then God is working in you and you shall believe on Christ. But others may say, "I don't want Christ; I don't want to leave my sin and follow him." Why should you grumble then if God has not elected you to salvation? For by your own confession you have admitted you would not like it. If you really want salvation in Christ, God will give it to you!