

May 7, 2017

Acts 13:44-48 / Acts 16:11-14 / Romans 9:6-16

The Unpopular Doctrine of Election or Salvation By Him Who Calls

Last week I mentioned a 78-year-old grandmother from England who visited her daughter in Honduras, and just happened to show up at our Bible Study the night we started Chap. 9 of Romans. She was the grandmother who told me she had never really understood the Gospel until that night, when I explained the verses we'll be looking at today. And all that, despite the fact that she'd gone to church all her life.

Well, this week her daughter sent me an email, saying: "Ah yes - Romans! I don't think people quite believe me when I say it took us 2 years of study to get through it!!!! I can't tell you how many times I've quoted from it, especially 'Not all of Israel is Israel'... Actually, it's funny you should mention Romans... Just 2 nights ago I was talking in my Bible Study group about how ministers avoid preaching on Romans 9! Yet look at the difference it made to my Mum (and to me - you can quote that as well!) to know about Election. I'm glad you still remember her. I know... how grateful she was for your teaching. Brief though the hours were that she had with you, the timing couldn't have been more perfect."

And I want to stress that that's what we'll be looking at today. Not so much the biblical doctrine of election (though that is what we find here), but the key to fully understanding the Gospel. For it tells us of God's great mercy in choosing people apart from any merit, or demerits, in their lives.

It's a truth that has rightly been called "unconditional election." God's choice to save certain individuals without consideration of any of the good or bad things they would do in their lives, or any foreseen desires or efforts on their part. A choice GOD made (as with Jacob and Esau) before they were ever born.

That's what makes this passage ever so profound, and ever so controversial. For here, unlike other places in Scripture, Paul traces the extraordinary nature of grace back to its ultimate source – GOD and His free and sovereign choice of certain people.

Many biblical passages – as we've seen on numerous occasions – focus the attention of the reader on what the SINNER MUST DO to be saved. They must believe. They must turn from their wicked ways and place all their trust for salvation in Jesus. They must cast themselves upon Christ – who in that moment becomes for them their righteousness, holiness and redemption.

As sinners, we must turn from wanting to be lord of our own lives, and allow Christ to assume His rightful place as Lord of our lives. Turning from a life of self-reliance and self-effort and self-determination to a life of wholehearted trust and complete reliance on the efforts Jesus made on our behalf.

Yet that's not at all what we find here in Romans 9. For although Paul *IS SPEAKING* of how one comes to be saved (focusing on the Israelites in particular), He does not say one word in this entire passage about what we must do.

Instead, he approaches the whole issue from the divine perspective, pulling back the curtain (so to speak) that would otherwise obscure our ability to ever gaze upon the secret and mysterious counsels of God.

And in doing so he allows us to SEE WHAT GOD DOES on behalf of certain undeserving sinners to ensure that they will become partakers of His salvation.

It's divine revelation in the ultimate sense. Because it reveals to us truths we could never know if Paul did not share them with us in this chapter. / Profound truths. / Life-changing truths. / Truths that

change the way we view everything in regard to our own salvation and that of others.

So, what are they? **FIRST** we come to the crux of the whole issue of salvation: It's grounding in the sheer, undeserved, and unearnable grace of God. And we must remember what we looked at last week from vv. 1-10. For it reminds us that Paul is defending God (or God's Word) against the accusation that it had failed, because many Jews in his day had not come to Christ for salvation – even though God had chosen them as a people, and given them His Law, and the covenants, and the promises, etc.

And Paul responded by saying in vv. 6b-10, that it wasn't God's purpose to save all Israelites, for *“not all who are descended from Israel are Israel”* (v. 6b). Or we could say, *“Not all who are Israelites by their inherited genetic link to Abraham, are truly God's people in the spiritual sense of belonging to Him and being accepted by Him, by grace, through faith.”*

Israel (in the OT) is a term that came to mean, “God's people.” And in a broad sense that meant those who were of the Jewish race, or those who could trace their lineage back to Abraham.

But as Paul points out (and all Jews would have agreed with him here): He did not give His Law and covenant and saving promises to ALL who were descendants of Abraham, but those who were descendants of Abraham through Isaac – the “child of promise,” and not his other son, Ismael, who was conceived through his affair with Hagar (vv. 7-8).

Its Paul's way of saying God's word HAD NOT FAILED to save ALL Abraham's descendants; because it was NEVER SENT FORTH with the purpose of doing that. It was only for those who came forth from Abraham – through Isaac.

And Paul doesn't stop there, but goes on to shrink the pool even further. Because he goes on to say that it's not all who can trace their heritage back through Isaac to Abraham, but all those who can trace their lineage back through JACOB to Isaac to Abraham.

And this is the part that confuses some people. God gave Jacob another name. He gave him the name, "Israel" (which literally means, "one who wrestles with God") after he had his wrestling match with the angel of the Lord at Bethel.

So, when Paul says, "*Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,*" his point is that God's word and promises are NOT given to ALL who could trace their lineage back through Isaac to Abraham, but only those who could trace it through Jacob to Isaac to Abraham.

And please bear with me, I know this requires a knowledge of the OT, which many modern-day Christians often lack – somehow thinking the OT is a book for the Jews and not us!

Jacob was one of two twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah, the other being Esau. But as Paul goes on to tell us in v. 11: "*Yet, before the children had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by Him who calls – she was told, "The older (Esau) will serve the younger (Jacob)."*

It wasn't just a prediction, it was a sovereign declaration! And then he quotes Mal. 1:2-3 where God says: "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*"

Or as we could put it, "*Jacob I accepted, but Esau I rejected.*"

For in Scripture, to "love" someone means to accept or embrace them affirmingly, and to "hate" means to reject or refuse to embrace them affirmingly.

And to this point the Jews would have agreed with Paul when he points out that even though Esau was a descendant of Isaac, God did not purpose to save him either, nor his descendants. For He had purposed to reject him – *“before the twins were ever born, or had done anything good or bad...”*

Which affirms what Paul has been trying to say since v. 6: God’s word and His promises have not failed! Rather, as Paul has very capably shown, they were not given to save every person who could trace their lineage back to Abraham. They weren’t even given to save every person who could trace their lineage back through ISAAC to Abraham or JACOB to Isaac to Abraham.

Which brings us to the main point Paul is making, and the question we must ask here: “Who, then, was His word sent forth to save?”

And what’s the answer? Those He chose to save, like Jacob as opposed to Esau, before they were ever born. God’s word was sent forth to save the elect. And it will not fail to do so.

Ishmael and Esau are just two examples that prove that point. That ultimately, when it comes right down to it, God’s word and promises are NOT given to save ALL PEOPLE (otherwise all would be saved!), but to save those God has chosen to save.

And **THAT** is the truth that sets many people off. Why? “Because it doesn’t seem fair” (v. 14). And not just to us, but to the people Paul was writing to back then!

In fact, if you interpret this passage in any way that makes it sound fair or just to the typical person, you can know your interpretation is wrong. Because Paul basically says if you heard him CORRECTLY it will surely sound unjust and unfair. And not only to us, but to people in his day too.

This teaching has always met with resistance. Thus he states: *“What then shall we say? Is God unjust?”* (That is, for choosing to save some and not others?) And to most who hear this (at least initially, for the first time) the answer is probably something like this: *“I know He can’t be, but it sure sounds like it.”*

Which brings us to the **SECOND** point – what, then, does God base His election or choice to save certain people, and not others, on? And what’s the answer? Like it or not (and most don’t) it all rests in His sovereign pleasure, in showing love and grace or mercy to those He chooses to show it to.

It’s the same truth Paul speaks about in Ephesians 1:5-6 where he says to believers: *“In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with HIS PLEASURE and WILL – to the praise of His glorious grace.”*

LISTEN: It was NOT because He looked down the annals of history and saw certain people doing good things – *people with more noble desires than others, who made stronger efforts to fight sin, love others and love Him.*

Not at all! You can’t make that thought fit with the text at all. For what does Paul say in v. 11? *“Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – so that God’s purpose in ELECTION might stand: not by works but by Him who calls, she was told...”*

That’s the key: God does it (He chooses some people & not others) before they are ever born / and without any regard to any foreseen good or bad works they would do – SO THAT – His purpose in election might stand.

And what’s his purpose in election? Paul told us: It’s to make salvation rest on the basis of His call and not works!

And in v. 16 he adds: *“It does NOT depend, therefore, on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.”*

You see, here’s the problem. God could either choose people ahead of time on the basis of a foreseen desires they would have, or efforts they would make, or works they would do (which would base salvation in human works), or He could choose them on the basis of nothing at all in them, but simply upon His mercy and sheer grace (which bases salvation what the Bible says, in grace).

In fact, as I went through this material in my church in Honduras, a group of about 7- 8 Wheaton College grads pulled me aside one day before everyone else arrived, and asked why God did it this way.

And my response to them is the same as I will tell you. *“If salvation is to be by grace, this is how it has to be. For if God chose us on the basis of something good in us or done by us, then it would ultimately be grounded in works, and the Gospel would be a lie.”*

You see, though we tend to be people who affirm that salvation is by grace (or at least I hope we do), there’s always this little Pharisee inside us that really DOESN’T want to believe it’s all sheer grace. We want to believe that God saw something good in US as opposed to OTHERS. Some divine spark, some diamond, some light, or desire. Some good thing we would do, or virtue we would possess, or goodness we would have, or effort we would make – that caused Him to choose us as opposed to others.

But Paul says, “no.” Because that doesn’t fit with, *“God’s purpose in ELECTION,”* which was (and still is) to make salvation *“by Him who calls and NOT by works.”*

Or as he puts it in v. 16, to make it all depend on, *“God’s mercy, and NOT any desire or effort on our part.”*

So, Paul wants us to *KNOW* that if we are a believer, it's because God chose us before we were ever born. And both here and in Ephesians he makes clear it was NOT because of anything good, or virtuous, or noble, or special, or better, or noteworthy in a good sense that He saw in us as opposed to others.

If you read Genesis, you will actually find that Esau appears to be more honest and noble than his deceptive scoundrel of a brother, Jacob. But that's Paul's point. God did not love Jacob because he was good, or would be better than his brother.

He tells us it had nothing to do with what either brother would do or would not do, in the good or bad sense. It simply had to do with the fact that God chose to love Jacob and hate (or reject) Esau.

And if we are to look for the "why?" the only one's Paul gives for God's choosing one and not the other are: 1st) So that "God's purpose in election might stand" (not by works but by Him who calls), and 2^{ndly}) so that it "might depend on mercy" and NOT any desire or efforts made by either one (mercy being just the opposite of what we deserve).

That's why it's often rightly called: Unconditional election. Because it's not conditioned on anything is us, except maybe our desperate need for grace.

So, **LAST**, why, if we have come to faith, did God choose us? Or if I can make it more personal and ask, "*So why did God choose me?*" There's really only one answer -- I honestly have no clue whatsoever.

For according to what Paul says here, He simply chose (contrary to what I deserve) to love me, and show me mercy, there really is no answer. And believe me I've looked!

As an introvert, always engaged in self-examination, I KNOW ME. And thus like David, in Psalm 51, I can also say: “I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.” I know I was nothing but a rebellious, idolatrous, Christ-denying, pleasure-seeking, sin-loving, angry, irreverent, unholy and ungodly kid, bent on doing my own thing and running my own life (and doing a horrible job of it at that).

And apart from His grace that came over me when I was in my early 20’s – quite apart from my asking for it, wanting it, or desiring it, I would surely still be following in that same path.

That’s why I have always loved Spurgeon’s quote in this regard, where he says of divine election (and I’ve read it before): *“I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen Him, and I am sure He chose me before I was born, or else He never would have chosen me afterwards, and He must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I could never find any reason in myself why He should have looked upon me with special love.”*

Can’t we all say that? Isn’t THAT one of the reasons we struggle with this doctrine? Isn’t it because the self-justifying Pharisee in us always wants to make God’s choice of us conditioned upon some good thing in us as opposed to others? Yes, my friends, it is.

Yet as people who know Scripture well, we KNOW that if there is anything, it is merely the sin and pride which would serve to disqualify us!

As one wise old saint aptly put it: *“The only thing I contribute to my redemption is the sin that made it necessary.”*

After all, think of how unbearably self-righteous we would be (and could not avoid being) if it were true that our election and salvation was based on something special, or better, or more righteous or virtuous in us, as opposed to others. Paul says “no.” There’s nothing. Don’t bother looking.

Election is UNCONDITIONAL. God simply has mercy on whom He chooses to have mercy and compassion on whom He chooses to have compassion (v. 15).

In fact, if anything is true, He chose US to be saved as opposed to OTHERS, merely to accentuate His grace to undeserving sinners, and to show to all that it can't possibly be by works, desire or effort on our part – or He never would have chosen us! (vv. 12 and 16)

If anything, we should look for things that would actually DISQUALIFY us! Because only in that way do we assure people (as with Jacob the scoundrel) that God's election of us HAD TO BE UNCONDITIONAL, since it surely couldn't be anything in us or about us!

The worst thing we could ever do is give people the impression that God chose and called because we were special, more righteous or better than others. For that would simply reinforce the all-too-common misconception that salvation is by works.

Listen: According to Paul (and this goes for every true believer) – if God chose you, it's simply because He chose to choose you and love you. The reason for our election lies in Him, and not in us.

Remember what Paul said in Eph. 1:5-6? *“In love He predestined us to be adopted as children, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves.”*

That is, the reason He chose us from the divine standpoint, was simply because it pleased Him to show us love, and it both highlighted and gained praise for His grace – which He freely and not conditionally gave to us. And “freely” means NOT under any compulsion, or NOT as a reward for any supposedly thing good in me or done by me.

It's a truth that humbles our pride, kills self-righteousness, obliterates the notion of works, and gives birth to unspeakable joy and a heart-felt gratitude to God for showing such undeserved mercy and kindness to unworthy sinners like us.