



## Election 1: God's Sovereign Choice

Romans 9:6-13

Rev. Fred Greco

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Our text this morning is Romans 9:6-13. This is one of the most difficult parts of all of the Bible. That's not because there's obscure imagery, like in the books of Ezekiel or Revelation. It's not because the grammar of the text is difficult to understand. It's because so often we don't want to hear its message. We expect the God of the universe to act in accordance with our American sensibilities of salvation. It is, after all, part of human nature to want to be in control, to want to make our own way. This is especially an American trait. We pride ourselves on being a place of equal opportunity for all, but this section of Romans 9 cuts against that. It shows us a sovereign God who has made his own choice, who has his own free will, and in the end we will be glad for it. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans 9, beginning at verse 6:

*"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' 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. For this is what the promise said: 'About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.' And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 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 him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us your Word. We thank you that your Word challenges us, that it does not allow us to think in terms of our own categories and needs and wants but that it reveals to us your will, your character. We ask that you would open our eyes, O Lord, that we might see our Lord Jesus Christ, for it is in Christ's precious name we pray, amen.

We come now to a difficult and controversial section of Romans, chapter 9. We're going to be spending this week and the next two weeks studying this chapter in the context of the doctrine of election. It is not a coincidence that the doctrine of election comes *here* in the book of Romans, right after the passage we just looked at two weeks ago, in which Paul pours out his heart for the lost.

This morning, I would like us to see three things from this text. First, we will see that *God's promise has not failed*. Secondly, we will see *God's election established*, and finally, we will see that *God's purpose is necessary*. God's promise has not failed, God's election is established, and God's purpose is necessary.

## God's Promise Has Not Failed

As we look at this passage, it is important for us to see that election does not come to us out of the blue. It's not as if Paul comes to us and says, "Okay. Let me teach you about this theological topic right now." No. This is important for us to realize, because that's often how we approach the doctrine of election, as if it is detached from everyday life, as if it is a doctrine to be debated rather than learned.

Where this doctrine comes to us is just at the end of Romans, chapter 8, Paul had been saying that the security of the believer depends not on him but, rather, on the purpose of God. The argument was that nothing could frustrate God's purpose. Paul wrote, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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."

This statement is a comfort to the believer. It is a logical result of what Paul had said in Romans 8:28, that God works all things for the ultimate good of those who are called according to his purpose. But immediately, from this an objection rises. There is an accusation that rises against Paul. It goes something like this: "Paul, if what you say is true, what about the Jews? After all, they were called by God. They were set apart. They were the ones who had all kinds of spiritual benefits.

You told us about these, Paul, in verses 4 and 5. As a matter of fact, Christ came *from* them. That is, he was descended from the flesh, from the Jews, and he came *for* them. He was a Jewish Messiah. Yet we look out," the accusation states, "and they've not embraced Christ. They've been cast away, so to speak. You yourself, Paul, know this, and you are in anguish about it. Isn't this evidence of the failure of God's purpose, the failure of God's purpose such that he could not keep his people?"

Now, on the surface, it *does* look as if God has abandoned his people and all of the promises he made to them. This accusation is important, and it is one we must take seriously. It gives context to the entire issue of election. We do not consider election outside of this context. But it also has practical implications, because if God cannot keep his promises to Israel, how do I know he'll keep his promise to *me*? In other words, unless this objection or accusation is answered, we cannot take comfort and hope from Romans 8.

This is why theology is important, and this is the purpose of theology. It is to know God better, to know ourselves better, to answer the questions of life, eternity, and salvation. It is not to win arguments or to debate theoreticals. This accusation comes to Paul, but Paul hears, or we might rather say he *anticipates* this objection, and he answers it. His answer is not a dissertation on the abstract topic of election. He is answering a real question with real consequences. He is treating the objection that was raised about Israel, and he is doing so in a way that is best calculated to win people over.

Typical for Paul, he gets his answer out frankly and quickly. "No," he says. We've seen this before, where Paul answers an objection, "God forbid! May it not be so!" This answer that begins verse 6 is actually ungrammatical. It's an instance in which the word *no* leads off the sentence. Paul starts with an instinctive rebuttal to this accusation. He will then move on to a more comprehensive theological answer in verses 7-13, but first, he gives the general contours of his answer in verse 6.

The great Martyn Lloyd-Jones says this is Paul's method. He says, "Put down your principle. Make your big statement. Then demonstrate it, illustrate it, and establish it. Then gather it all together and wind it up again at the end." This is what Lloyd-Jones says Paul does so often. He makes his big statement, but he doesn't leave it there. He then illustrates it and explains it.

That's exactly what Paul does in verse 6. That's Paul's big statement. "No! This is not the case," Paul says. Literally, "The thing is not such as this, that God's word has failed. The case is not so. The word of God has not failed." Then he gives the reason for this. "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel..." What does Paul mean when he says, "The word of God has not failed"? Well, if we look first at this phrase the *word of God*, we see that it can have several meanings or it summarizes several things.

Often, we see it refer to the Bible itself, to the Scriptures, and that is true. The Bible also uses this phrase the *word of God* to refer to the gospel. More specifically, it is used to describe the word of salvation the apostles brought to the lost. But here, following on from chapter 8, I believe it refers to the purpose of God. It is his declared purpose written down in his Word, even as it is right here. His declared purpose of what God has said he will do.

Paul is saying that God's purpose, his promises, have not failed. Now what does he mean by *failed*? This word means to fall down, to be ineffectual. You've seen it used to describe in the Bible the death of a flower that falls to the ground. It also describes chains falling off a prisoner. It can even be used to describe a ship running aground.

It is something that has caused failure, inability, something to not work as it should, contrary to its purpose. Paul wants us to know this is not true of God's promises. They have not fallen to the ground as a failure. They remain steadfast and true. He then gives the reason why he can say that, in spite of the rejection of Christ by the great majority of the Jews, God's chosen people.

Now, we have to understand Paul could have just looked at us and said, "Well, it's because God is sovereign. Deal with it," but he doesn't do that. Paul knows we have questions. Paul knows we might have objections, and he wants us to understand the truth and be convinced by it. So, instead, he meets the accusation on its own terms. He explains it is the objector who does not understand the nature of Israel.

He says all those who come out of Israel as a source, that is, who are descended as Israelites, are not the true Israel. Rather, there is a true Israel within the broader people of Israel. They are not the same. If we think about it, this is the key. This little statement in verse 6 is the key to understanding all of the Old Testament. Have you ever wondered why we see the Israelites grumbling all the time, complaining all the time, rebelling all the time, disobeying all the time? This is it.

It's why the Israelites were captive in Babylon. It's why the religious leaders rejected Jesus. The prophets speak about this many, many times in the Old Testament. They speak about it in terms of the *remnant*, the remnant within Israel. Isaiah and Jeremiah especially speak of the remnant, this remnant who follow the Lord, the remnant who is faithful, the remnant that the Lord maintains within Israel. What the *remnant* just means is a remaining small portion within the greater people of Israel.

Isaiah and Jeremiah are just saying with different words not all Israel is the true Israel. They're saying the exact same thing. John the Baptist makes this same point when he confronts the Pharisees. He tells them they have to repent, and they look at John and say, "We don't have any need of repentance. We're descended from Abraham. That automatically makes us the good guys. We have nothing to apologize for. What do you think? *We're* sinners? We're descended from Abraham."

You remember that wonderful famous answer John gives to them. He says, "God is able to raise up from these stones children of Abraham." The point is it's not about physical descendants. It's not about natural descendants. It's not about who we think we are. Our Lord makes the same point in John, chapter 8. He tells the Pharisees he can set them free by his truth, and they look at Jesus and say, "We don't need that. It's sufficient that we're Abraham's children."

It's like they didn't learn anything from their conversation with John. They press the same point. They say, "We're Abraham's children. We're the Israelites." But Jesus says, "If you were truly Abraham's children, you would have rejoiced to see my day, even as *he* did. You would follow your father Abraham. But by what you do you show that you are the children of your *true* father, the Devil." They were not true Israel.

Paul has made this same point before even in the book of Romans. In chapter 2, verses 28-29, he says it is not the outward things that makes one a Jew but the inward. He says it is not circumcision of the flesh but, rather, circumcision of the heart. It is not the flesh but the heart. It is not of man but of God. He says he is truly a Jew who is one inwardly.

It is good for us to hear and to answer this accusation that comes. This morning, ask yourself this question: Do you think you are a Christian because you live in America, because America is some sort of Christian nation? Or is it perhaps that you think you are a Christian because you're in church, because you obey your parents and let them drag you to church and you're here all of the time. Therefore, you're a Christian, because you're in church all the time or because your spouse wants you to come.

Paul gives you a warning here. Nothing external makes you a Christian...not where you were born, not being in church, not even being baptized. What is required is a changed heart, faith in Jesus, the work of the Spirit. Paul is calling you to examine yourself today. Next, Paul moves on to his more in-depth theological answer. You remember we said he would do this. His theological answer to this accusation is that God's election is established, and it is established because God is the one who produces his people.

### **God's Election Established**

Now, Paul has already made his point. This is important for us to see. Paul's main point is contained in verse 6. So, election is not a doctrine to be taken by itself; it is a means to understanding the biblical principle that natural descent is nothing but spiritual life is everything. As a result, Paul has three ways of making the same point. This should remind us that it's a very important point. He wants us to understand. He says it three ways.

First, he says not all Israel belongs to Israel, and then he says that not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, in verse 7. Rather, it is through Isaac that Abraham's offspring will be named. Then, finally, he says

in verse 8, it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God but, rather, the children of the promise who are the children of God. All three statements mean the same thing.

There are two ways to take each of the words *offspring*, *children*, and *Israel*, and we must distinguish the way in which they are meant, whether they are meant to refer to the greater group of people who are physically so or, rather, the smaller group of people who are spiritually so. The word we can look to to help us here is in verse 7, the word *named*. It's the exact same word we see in verse 11, and there it's translated *called*.

Some suggest this word is neutral, that it means something is designated and no more, that God has merely designated Isaac's descendants to be Israel. That's what the Pharisees thought, that it was almost mechanical, that God had designated the descendants of Isaac to be the people of God, but this word actually has more meaning than that. We see it in Romans 4:17, when God calls into existence things that do not yet exist. The same word there, *call*, as *named*.

What that means is that God brings something into being that was not yet in being. God is causative. God is taking the initiative. He is responsible for the thing existing. It's the same thing in chapter 8, verse 30, when we read that all who are predestined, those God called. So God makes his choice of predestination, and then he calls that choice of people into existence by calling them. Again, it is God doing the calling. It is God doing the initiative.

Over and over again in the Bible, this word refers to God calling people out of darkness and sin and into salvation and life. In fact, as Paul begins to support his statement in verse 7, from verse 8 he uses a different word. He uses the word *counted*. "...are counted as offspring." *That* word is more of a neutral word. It's a word of arithmetic. How do you count something? Well, you could do it either on your fingers and toes or with a calculator or with a tally sheet, but all you are doing is recognizing and counting things. That's what that word means, as distinct from this word in verse 7 and verse 11.

Now, why is this important? Because God is the one initiating all of this. The true children of Abraham, the true Israel, come through Isaac. Why? Have you ever asked that question? Why do they come through Isaac? They come through Isaac because God had determined that to be so. Think of the difference between Ishmael and Isaac. One is the result of a natural process of man's wisdom. The other is a result of God's supernatural process, *his* wisdom, *his* choice.

In fact, God's wisdom and process go against all human wisdom. Both Sarah and Abraham laugh when God tells them Sarah will bear a son, Isaac, but God brought it about. Look at the order that's involved here. You see, we may think what's involved here is that Isaac is born and God chooses Isaac over Ishmael, but that's not what happens. First comes God's choice. First comes his promise designating Isaac as the true offspring.

Paul reminds us of this in verse 9. He says, "The promise said: 'About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.'" God doesn't produce Isaac and then choose him; he chooses Isaac and then produces him. The order is important here. God brought about Isaac in order to fulfill his promise, his choice, and his purpose. When we think about the work of God, we must always begin with God, not us.

God does not owe us. He is not beholden to us. He is not responding *to* us. He is not wringing his hands and hoping and wishing someone would believe and be a part of his people. No. He promised that to the Lord Jesus Christ. He told the Lord Jesus he would give to him a people. He promised and told us *he* will bring it about and that nothing can stop it. Do you believe that? Do you believe your salvation depends on God and on *his* promise and not on *you* and on your faithfulness? That is the gospel.

Now, Paul anticipated an accusation, he answered it, and he gave theological proof for his answer. He told us of the difference between Ishmael and Isaac, but there's more. You may have noticed it by now, but Paul is brilliant. He's also inspired by the Holy Spirit, so Paul is never caught off guard. We could just imagine a Jew listening to Paul, waiting to pounce, getting ready to interrupt. He's ready with his next objection.

He would say, "But Ishmael wasn't a real Jew. His mother was an Egyptian. That's the difference between Ishmael and Isaac. One is a real Jew and one is not. This is the difference between the two of them. Abraham's offspring *had* to be named through Isaac, because Ishmael wasn't a real Jew." But before the objection can even get out of our objector's mouth, Paul says something like, "I'm glad you brought that up. Let me answer *that* now."

This is what Paul says in verse 10: "And not only so..." "By the way, if you're thinking of bringing up the Ishmael angle, not only so. Let me answer that first before we even let that get down the road a bit." Paul is not conceding to the objection, but instead he's showing that he's making a true point. Someone *could* try and avoid the truth in the case of Isaac by pointing out they had different mothers. This is true, but that can't be done in the case of Jacob.

You see, the Jews were proud of their ancestry from the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They used their names like a litany in all sorts of ways. Paul could have started this discussion with Abraham. He could have pointed out that God had called Abraham out of idolatry and to himself, but that would have potentially given the Jews an opportunity to look to Abraham's obedience and to rest in that. We already saw that Paul had to deal with that in chapter 4. He had to show it was because of Abraham's faith, not because of his works that he was saved.

He could have also stopped with Isaac, since God himself had chosen Isaac, and more than that, he had brought Isaac about and into being in order to fulfill his purpose and promise. But now he moves on to Jacob to show something else that is crucial about God's election, his purpose. He does it to show it is due to nothing in man. The birth of Jacob and Esau is actually similar to that of Isaac. In both instances, God intervenes in order to bring about the birth of a child.

We see this in Genesis 25. Rebekah is barren, and God hears the prayers of Rebekah and Isaac and gives her children. Once again, this is something that is beyond nature. But this history, this story is perfect in every way to show it is all of God and nothing of man. First, the two are twins. They have the same father. They have the same mother. The objection regarding Ishmael is just washed away.

There is nothing to differentiate them. In fact, the only difference is that Esau has the more favorable circumstance, that Esau is older than Jacob by a few minutes. Esau is the firstborn. But again, Paul tells us God states the truth about both of them before they were ever born. Just like with Isaac, so it is with them, but there is a difference here.

God is going to speak about both of them, Esau *and* Jacob. God says the older will serve the younger. This is against nature, against man's wisdom.

Then he also says, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." Paul here is quoting from Malachi, chapter 1, showing the difference between Jacob and Esau. What we need to see is that God's choice had nothing to do with the qualities he foresaw or saw in either of them. In fact, he goes against the natural quality of birth order. He overturns that in his sovereign election. Now, why does God do this? We see why God does this in verse 11. It's actually inserted in the middle of Paul's argument.

Usually, Paul would give his final reason at the end of his argument as a capstone, but it's as if here Paul can't wait to get it out. He interrupts himself. He says in verse 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 him who calls..." That's why God did this.

Esau and Jacob were not born yet. They had done no good or bad. There was no human reason to choose Jacob over Esau, but there was a divine reason. It was so God's purpose of election might continue. You see, God did this so his purpose might endure, so it might remain, so it might continue. So we see that God clearly chooses without regard to man's merit, whether good or bad, but instead, he chooses in accordance with his purpose.

### **God's Purpose is Necessary**

That is where we come to our third point: God's purpose is necessary. First, it is necessary for the certainty of salvation. God's purpose and election is necessary because, without it, salvation will fail. A salvation that depends on us will fail. God chose Jacob over Esau before so his purpose and process would be sure and steadfast.

Stop for a minute and think about Jacob. He was a mess. He tricked his father. He defrauded his brother. He showed favoritism in his wives. He didn't raise his children properly. Think about all of the problems that occurred with his children. You can't go up for parent of the year when one of your kids tries to kill another one of your kids. Jacob is a mess.

Stop here for a moment and think about how gracious God is that it doesn't depend on you. Think about how often *you* have failed your family, how often *you* have done the wrong thing. Do you really want God to choose you based on *your* actions, *your* merit, *your* worth? We need to go back to verse 6. Paul says the word of God, the purpose of God, has not fallen down. Why? Because that purpose is always carried out through election.

God's purpose does not depend on us and our wisdom, our faith, or our choice. If it did, then the word of God would fail. It might even be seen as having failed in the case of Israel. If God had chosen Israel as a nation and left his purpose up to them, it would have been a colossal failure. They rebelled. They left God. They sought after false gods. Instead, Paul tells us the purpose of God stands firm, even in the case of Israel. Why? Because he is superintending it.

He has chosen a people for himself. He has brought that people about from the very beginning, from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God's ways have not changed. There was never any doubt that God would have a people in

Israel. They were the true Israel *he* had chosen, *he* had preserved, that *he* had brought about with a spiritual birth, not a natural birth. So, there is no doubt at all that God will keep his promise and purpose for the church, because it doesn't depend on *us*.

God is not looking down the corridors of time, hoping people believe his Word. He knows this isn't possible, because we are dead in our trespasses and sins. No. God has chosen for himself a people, a people he produces by the work of his Spirit, giving them life and faith in Jesus and his work. That is what makes salvation certain: not the firmness of my faith, nor the amount of my works for God, but the purpose of God. God's purpose will never fail. He ensures that it will not as he takes it from the beginning to the end.

There's one final point we must make today. We will see more about election in the next few weeks, but we have to address one final objection. Often, we want to speak back to Paul, to say, "Isn't there some reason for God's love for Jacob? After all, Esau was a pretty rotten guy. He had no time for God. He sold his birthright. Didn't God know that was going to happen?"

When we do this, we have to understand we are not advocating for Jacob; we are advocating for ourselves, because we want there to be a reason for God to save us, a reason based in *us*, not in God. We can call it *works*, we could call it *our faith*, or we could call it when we come to God unaided, but in any event, when we do this, it makes God's grace *not* grace. It is our attempt to bring in merits to our salvation. We must run from this kind of thinking. Salvation is all of God's sovereign grace for his glory. None of it is from us.

Some might say, "If there's nothing in me that causes God to love me, God is unjust." This is actually the most frequent argument that's used against election. "It's not fair. It's not just. There has to be a difference in those whom God saves and those he doesn't." We want justice. But what we have to understand is that in the gospel there is only one person who gets justice. It's the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only one who gets justice in the gospel.

If you're wondering this morning about God's sovereign choice, if you're not sure about what we've seen in verses 6-13, take a quick look at verse 14 now. What is the next question that comes up? It's "Is God unjust?" If Paul were not teaching God's sovereign choice, why would that question come up? We're going to look at this next week, but for now, allow this passage to humble your pride.

There is nothing in you to move the Lord to save you, and be thankful for that. Otherwise, you would still be dead in your trespasses and sins. It's like Sinclair Ferguson says. When it comes to grace, the only way up is down. Humble yourself before the sovereign grace of God and the purpose of God. It is there that you will find comfort and security in Christ.