

God's Sovereign Grace

Romans 9:1-13

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After two months of a summer series in Proverbs, we are back in Romans continuing our exposition of this wonderful book. As a reminder, the Bible is the greatest book ever written and Romans is arguably the greatest book within the greatest book as it explains most clearly how sinners are made righteous before a holy God. We spent all spring in Romans 8 ending with the wonderful assurance, "*[Nothing] in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:39 ESV). I spoke a couple places outside Bethel this summer. What message did I do when I did? Romans 8:39. It's an incredible assurance of God's forever love for his people.

This brings us to Romans chapters 9-11. If Romans 8 is the greatest chapter in the greatest portion of the greatest book ever written, Romans 9-11 is the most difficult and controversial section of the greatest portion of the greatest book ever written. Within these three chapters lay the central passages that divided Pelagian from Augustine, Luther from Erasmus, Whitefield from Wesley, and Calvin from Hobbes. The central question is this, which cause is the final and ultimate cause in our salvation—the will, purpose, plan, and choice of God *or* the will, faith, and action of man? Is God free or is man free? Is God sovereign over all or is he limited by man's apparent freedom of choice and will? All these we will explore as we go verse by verse through Romans 9-11.

Paul launches into God's electing love out of Romans 8 and God's inseparable love. If Romans was the only book of the Bible, we may think Romans 8 would be a good place to land the plane, wrap it up, give a final benediction, and say good night. But Romans isn't the only or the first book of the Bible. There is the matter of the 39 books of the Old Testament and the whole narrative of God making promises to a previous group of people—all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob known as the Israelites. Didn't God make promises of eternal love to them? Didn't he assure them of a Davidic kingdom reign forever and ever? Paul looks around at first century Judaism and many, if not most, had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Does God love Jesus-rejecting Israelites? Are they all under God's grace by genetic default? These are important questions because if God made them promises that seemingly had not yet worked out, can we be sure that New Testament Christianity isn't just Israel 2.0?

This is literally an elementary illustration. I remember in elementary school, the prettiest girl in the school was Casey. One day Casey forgot her lunch. That's not a problem when you are the prettiest girl in the school. She went up to my friend John sitting at the nerd table, where I may or may not have also sat every day. I observed this with my own eyes. She said to John, "If you give me your lunch, I'll go with you" (this was late 1970s language for "be your girlfriend"). John was delighted and immediately gave her his lunch. She ate it and then broke up with him.

So much for enduring love. Is God's love easily given and easily withdrawn? Did God break any promise in the Old Testament of enduring love to Israel? Why were the Romans ruling the world and not Israel? Why so much Jewish animosity toward Jesus the Messiah and the gospel? Paul pivots from God's sovereign love to God's sovereign grace and a pattern of distinguishing grace even with the heroes of Israel's story. We are tackling 13 verses today.

Here's the point of them, "God has always sovereignly distinguished in the distribution of his grace and does so by his own sovereign choice."¹

Israel's Privilege and Paul's Pain (9:1-5)

"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 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." (Romans 9:1-3)

This is an astonishing statement by Paul. He reinforces that it is true to his heart and his conscience and even invoked the witness of the Holy Spirit. What? He has great sorrow and anguish for his fellow Jews and their blindness to the gospel. We could ask, why did Paul think he needed to say this? These three chapters are largely about Israel's place in God's redemptive plan. By now Paul is notorious among the Jews as the Christian apostle to the Gentiles. This was appalling to the Jews as their understanding was that Israelites were God's people, not Gentiles. Even the temple arrangement and courtyard restrictions suggested Israel's favored status in God's eyes. Paul was viewed by many as an enemy of Judaism.

This was all wrong as Paul was himself a Jew who loved his own people very much. Could he say it any stronger? "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ" if it meant the Jews would be saved. "Accursed" is the word *anathema*. It is applied to Jesus being cursed for us. Essentially, he is saying, *I'd be willing to go to hell forever if it meant my people went to heaven.*²

What an amazing heart for the lost! What a concern for the spiritual destiny of people he loves. Is there anyone in your life, even a close relative, for whom you could get close to saying that? *I'd go to hell for them to go to heaven.* We should add that he has just said we can't be separated from the love of Christ, so this a hypothetical statement to emphasize the point. He loves them. He greatly desires them to be saved.

Who do we desire to be saved so deeply that we even approach this sort of willing sacrifice? Does this resonate in the heart of our church? You can tell a church is inward focused when they no longer care about the eternal destiny of the community around them. This sort of church is the polar opposite to Paul. They may never say it, but the way they go about their business is essentially, *the community can go to hell as long as we and our children go to heaven.* I say this to myself as well as to you. Do we see our neighbors and friends and coworkers through any kind of grid like this? *I'd go to hell if it meant they went to heaven.* Let's be a church of Christians like that!

Far from diminishing the Jewish people, Paul does what he did at the end of chapter 2 and celebrates the incredible privileges Israelites have from God.

"They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen." (Romans 9:4-5)

¹ See S. Lewis Johnson, *Discovering Romans: Spiritual Revival for the Soul*, p. 153.

² Moses said a similar thing in Exodus 32:32.

Here are eight redemptive privileges in Israel's past. It's a little bit of an Old Testament history test. When did these happen? Adoption and Law were given at Mt. Sinai. Shekinah glory came in the wilderness wandering and temple dedication. God gave covenants and promises to the patriarchs, Moses and David. They worshipped God through the Levitical system at the tabernacle and temple. The grand finale is the profound reality that the Son of God himself was born a Jew. Jesus was Jewish. *"Who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."* (Romans 9:5)

Any one of these would put Israel in a special status among the nations of history. When considered together, you could hardly overstate the importance of Israel in God's redemptive plan. Paul isn't minimizing it or diminishing the Jews. Rather, he celebrates it even as it pains him to see their rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

Children of DNA or Children of Promise? (9:6-13)

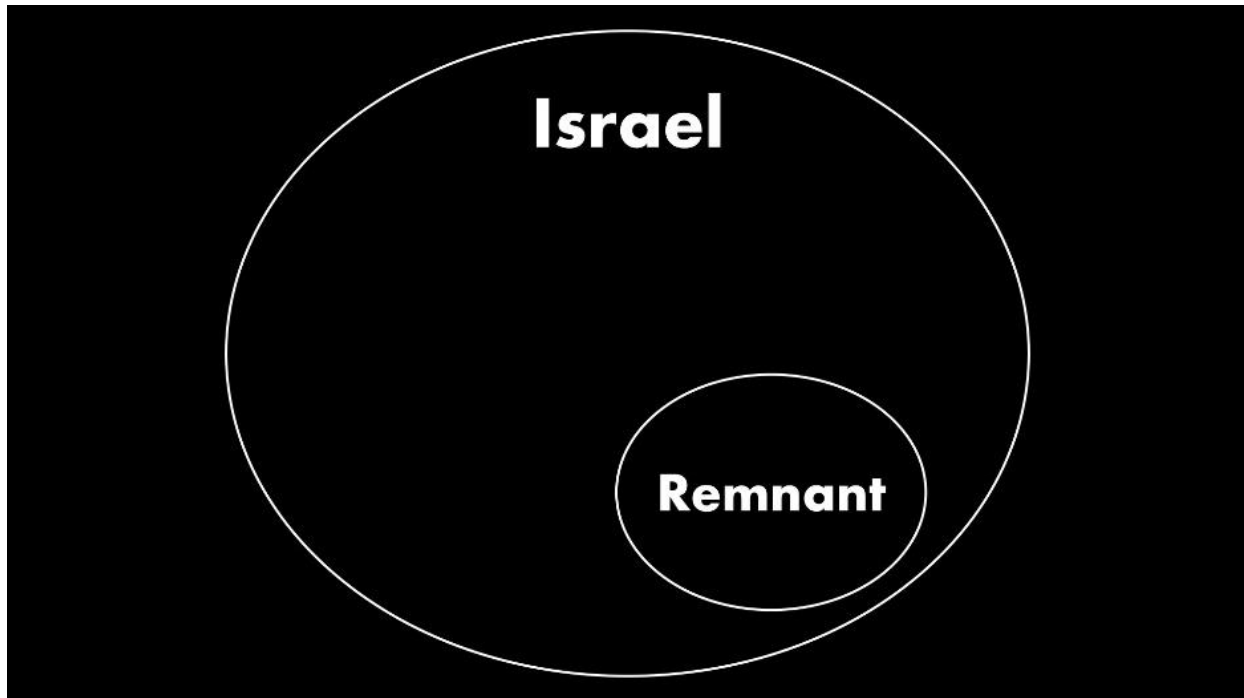
"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children 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.'" (Romans 9:6-9)

Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. How was he received? It certainly was a mixed reception with some believing and many not believing. As Isaiah 53 prophesied, Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel's hopes and dreams, yet he was rejected. So, this leaves us with a real conundrum about the descendants of Abraham. In spite of their unbelief, are they all loved still by God in a saving way? Can a descendant of Abraham reject Jesus and still be under covenantal love? Is DNA enough to get a Jew to heaven?

"Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." (Romans 9:6) This is a play on words. It helps to read it, *not all who are physically descended from Israel belong to the true spiritual Israel.* There is genetic Israel and then there is spiritual Israel. Look ahead a few verses to verses 27-28,

"And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.'" (Romans 9:27-28)

"Only a remnant of them will be saved." Who is the remnant? (See chart on next page) The remnant are the true recipients of God's covenantal promises regarding salvation. God made many promises to Israel outside of salvation including that very prized piece of land alongside the Mediterranean that has been fought over for thousands of years. Land. Glory. Worship. All these things were given to the genetic descendants of Abraham.



Not all who are descended from Abraham are the true Israel of God. Do we expect to see Absalom in heaven? Achan? Saul? How about the Jews in Nazareth who tried to assassinate Jesus? How about Caiaphas? Here's a Jew we know won't be there, Judas Iscariot. Jesus guaranteed he would be in hell. If genetic code was all you needed to be under the saving love of God, then everyone with Jewish blood is going to heaven. But clearly not.

Here Paul goes for the jugular. He points out an awkward chapter in the story of Abraham.

"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.'" (Romans 9:7-9)

There's this skeleton in the family closet and her name was Hagar. Abraham was promised a son by Sarah, but it was taking a long time. According to the accepted custom of the day, Abraham had sexual relations with Sarah's handmaid Hagar to create an heir. His name was Ishmael. He was not a love child. This was considered legitimate in that culture, BUT Ishmael was not of Sarah and was not the child of promise.

What's the argument? If simply being a descendant of Abraham gave you all the privileges of God's covenantal love, then why aren't the descendants of Ishmael included? They are from Abraham too! Clearly, they weren't anywhere considered God's people. In fact, they were the historic enemies of Israel.

A reasoned Israelite could say, well, OK. Yes, Ishmael was from Abraham, but he wasn't from Sarah so that doesn't count. Same dad, different mom. Paul gets even more awkward.

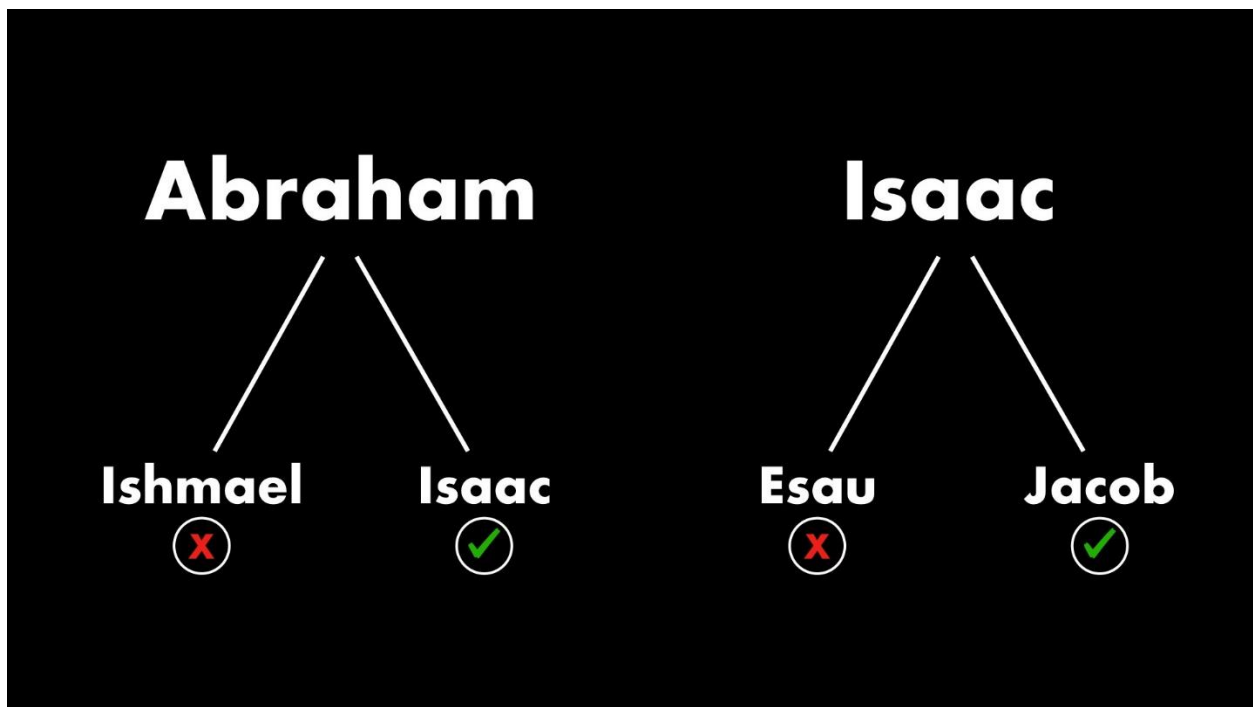
"And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or

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.’” (Romans 9:10–13)

Isaac was Abraham’s son of promise by Sarah. God revealed himself also to Isaac and made promises to his descendants. Rebekah was his wife. She became pregnant. It’s not like they had ultrasounds to tell them, *you’re having twins!* God told Rebekah she was pregnant with twins, and long before they were born, that the younger would be the son of promise.

Unlike Ishmael who had a different mom, Jacob and Esau couldn’t have been more alike. Same grandpa, Abraham. Same dad. Same mom. Conceived by the same sexual intimacy. Indeed, fraternal twins. Same womb.

And here is Paul’s point, even though they had all these things the same, before they were born, before their moral and spiritual lives had any direction, God chose the younger, Jacob, as the son of promise and recipient of his grace.



Then he quotes Malachi 1:2-3, *"As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"* Hated here is known as a Jewish idiom where contrasts are taken to the extreme to make a point. Jesus did the same in Luke 14:26, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother...he cannot be my disciple."* Really? What about the fifth commandment? He’s making the point that love for Jesus must be our greatest love. So, when God says, *"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,"* what he means is that *I have placed my eternal saving love on Jacob, and anyone without that is rejected like Esau.*

Why? Why did God choose Jacob and not Esau? We know it wasn’t because of their good works or moral decisions because he chose them before they were born while still in Rebekah’s womb. So why then did he choose one and not the other? *"In order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls."* (Romans 9:11)

The call of God and the election of God get at who is the ultimate cause for salvation. Am I called because I believe, or do I believe because I'm called? Am I elect because I believe, or do I believe because I'm elect? If we apply the question to two fetuses in a womb the answer is obvious; God's call and election precede Jacob's faith. He was determined to be the son of promise long before he was born.

What Does This Mean?

God's saving grace is not a matter of family genetics

Many in Israel thought because they were genetic descendants of Abraham, they must also be spiritual descendants of Abraham. They were saved because they were God's chosen people. Is this confusion so hard to believe? How many people today are living their life with at least some level of confidence that they are good with God because of the Christian home they grew up in, the faith of their father and mother, or the legacy of being good kids from a good Christian home? *We're all good because we grew up around the blessings of Christianity.*

This is my dad's own story. He grew up Dutch Reformed. He had two assurances of salvation—He was Reformed, and Dutch. He learned the catechisms and was a good Dutch boy, but it wasn't until he was confronted by the preaching of Billy Graham at a youth conference with whether he personally had repented and had faith in Jesus that he personally trusted in Christ.

I wonder how many people here think they are Jacob, but in God's eyes they are Esau? One author points out that essentially what Paul is saying is that most of ethnic Israel in the eyes of God are Ishmaels and Esaus.³

What about you? Forget your heritage, your legacy, what school or churches you have in your story. Are you a genetic Christian or a real one? In the recesses of your soul, are you trusting in your legacy or the Lord Jesus Christ? God delights to turn Esaus into Jacobs, into sons and daughters of promise through the gospel and a personal trust in what Jesus did. Trust in Christ today.

Christian, God was loving you long before you were born

There's much more on this to come, but which son deserved salvation? Jacob or Esau? Neither. God was under no obligation to choose or love or save either one. Yet, in his sovereign grace he loved Jacob unto salvation. Later, God would describe himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Election means many things, but it wonderfully means that God loved us before we ever existed. In the mystery of the divine mind in eternity past, he was thinking of you, purposing through election and calling to set his sovereign grace upon you. If he loved you in eternity past and provided for your salvation through the cross of Jesus, can you know he loves you today? Can you be confident of his love in your tomorrows? If he loved you for eternity past, can we be confident he will love us for eternity future?

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, p. 502.

What wasn't possible for Paul was a reality for Jesus

Paul says, *I'd be willing to be cursed by God if it meant my people could be saved*. Paul couldn't be cursed, nor could God's love be taken from him. But there was one who was cursed by God so that his people could be saved. Isn't that what Jesus suffered? He took our curse so that we might be eternally loved by God. So, we conclude affirming the words of Romans 9:5 about Jesus, He is *Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever, Amen*.

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