

Woodland Baptist Church
 September 16, 2018
 Romans 9:6-12, Real Israel

Verses 1-12 The Children of Promise

1 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— **2** that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. **3** 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. **4** They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. **5** To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. **6** But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, **7** and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” **8** 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. **9** For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” **10** And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, **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— **12** she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” **13** As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Introductory Thoughts (6-12)

According to the typical understanding of Jewish Christians in Paul’s day, salvation history had taken an unexpected turn. Most of the people of Israel to whom the promises of salvation had been given refused to recognize the fulfillment of those promises. At the same time Gentiles, who were considered to be excluded from the covenant, were embracing the one in whom those promises had come to fruition. Paul insists, however, that this turn of events, though unexpected, does not violate the integrity of God’s word and his promises. Paul justifies that claim by showing what God’s word itself says about becoming a member of God’s true spiritual people. If the OT teaches that belonging to physical Israel in itself makes a person a member of God’s true spiritual people, then Paul’s gospel is in jeopardy. For were this the case, the gospel, proclaiming that only those who believe in Jesus Christ can be saved (cf. 3:20–26), would contradict the OT and be cut off from its indispensable historical roots. Paul therefore argues in vv. 6b–29 that belonging to God’s true spiritual people has always been based on God’s gracious and sovereign call and not on ethnic identity. Therefore, God is free to “narrow” the apparent boundaries of election by choosing only some Jews to be saved (vv. 6–13; 27–29). He is also free to “expand” the dimensions of his people by choosing Gentiles (vv. 24–26).¹

¹ Moo.

There is a strong emphasis on mercy, for Paul is not talking about a mighty and arbitrary tyrant, but about a God who loves all that he has made and specifically the people he has chosen. In this section of his argument he first makes the point that God has always worked on the principle of election, of choosing out people through whom he would work his purpose, then he goes on to make it clear that that purpose is mercy, and thirdly he looks at the question, “Why then does he find fault?”²

Paul’s train of thought unfolds as follows in these verses. Because God’s election of Israel did not depend on natural descent (vv. 6-10) or human merit (vv. 11-14), Israel’s disobedience cannot nullify God’s determined purpose for the nation.³

At first sight it would appear that God’s promise to Israel had failed, or literally ‘fallen’. For he had promised to bless them, but they had forfeited his blessing through unbelief. Israel’s failure was her own failure, however; it was not due to the failure of God’s word (6a). For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel (6b). That is, there have always been two Israels, those physically descended from Israel (Jacob) on the one hand, and his spiritual progeny on the other; and God’s promise was addressed to the latter, who had received it. The apostle has already made this distinction earlier in his letter between those who were Jews outwardly, whose circumcision was in the body, and those who were Jews inwardly, who had received a circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (2:28f.).⁴

Verse Exposition

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”

What does Paul mean by the Word of God?

The “word of God” that was in Paul’s mind was evidently God’s revelation of His plans for Israel in the Old Testament. There God revealed that He had chosen Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:5-6). The Israelites were to function as priests in the world by bringing the nations to God (cf. Isa. 42:6). They were to do this by demonstrating through their life in the Holy Land how glorious it can be to live under the government of God. Israel had failed to carry out God’s purpose for her thus far, and consequently had suffered His discipline. It looked as though “the word” that God had spoken concerning Israel’s purpose had “failed.” The Greek word translated “failed” (ekpeptoken) means “gone off its course,” like a ship. Paul proceeded to show that God would accomplish His purpose for Israel in the rest of chapters 9–11. The first part of verse 6 has been called “the text or thesis to be expounded.”⁵

Spiritual kinship, not ethnic origin, determined who was a true Israelite. The modern counterpart to this truth is that the blessings of salvation extend only to those who are right with God through genuine faith

² Morris

³ Constable

⁴ Stott

⁵ Constable

in Jesus Christ. The visible church includes many who belong to “Ishmael,” but salvation belongs only to “Israelites” who belong to the line of “Isaac.” God has not turned his back on the nation Israel; he has simply clarified what it means to be a true child of Abraham.⁶

“If Abraham’s faith be not in your hearts, it will be of no advantage that Abraham’s blood runs through your veins (John Flavel).” If descent from Abraham was what mattered, then the Ishmaelites and Edom were in the same position as Israel. But “Israel” was not ethnic Israel. Whatever might happen to ethnic Israel, the promise to “Israel” stood; the falling away of some, who were not true Israelites, had no bearing on the issue. “Israel is not a term like Ammon, Moab, Greece, or Rome. ‘Israel’ cannot be defined in terms of physical descent, or understood simply ‘on the human side’ (v. 5); it is created not by blood and soil, but by the promise of God, and therefore exists within the limits of God’s freedom.”⁷

What OT Scripture did Paul cite and why? Genesis 21:12 - 12 But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

These words of God to Abraham come in response to his reluctance to follow Sarah’s advice to banish his son Ishmael and Ishmael’s mother Hagar. They remind Abraham of a crucial distinction between his two sons. The “calling” of descendants “in” Isaac therefore involves more than the promise of physical offspring. For God promised that he would give many descendants to Ishmael as well as to Isaac (Gen. 17:20; 21:23). The advantage of Isaac lies rather in the spiritual realm: it is with Isaac, and not Ishmael, that God promises to establish his covenant (Gen. 17:21). It is from among Isaac’s descendants—not Ishmael’s—that God will call individuals to become part of his covenant people.⁸

Even though God promised to bless “Abraham’s descendants,” it was only one main branch of his family (“through Isaac”) that He singled out for special blessing. God’s special elective purpose applied only to Isaac and his line of descendants. This reference to God’s choice of Isaac over Ishmael is the first of three Old Testament illustrations of God’s sovereignty. The other two are Jacob/Esau (vv. 10-13) and Pharaoh (vv. 14-18).⁹

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⁶ Mounce

⁷ Morris

⁸ Moo

⁹ Constable

¹⁰ Mounce

8 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. 9 For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” [Genesis 17:21]

The opening phrase of v. 8 resembles a formula used by some Jews to introduce interpretations of Scripture, suggesting that v. 8 is Paul’s “commentary” on his quotation of Gen. 21:12. This commentary contrasts the “children of the flesh” with “the children of promise,” and asserts that only the latter can be truly considered “the children of God.” The immediate reference is to Ishmael—tied to Abraham only by natural descent (“the flesh”)—and Isaac—tied to Abraham by both natural descent and God’s promise.¹¹

It was not all the natural children of Abraham (“children of the flesh”) that God had in mind when He spoke of uniquely blessing Abraham’s seed. It was only regarding the children born supernaturally—in fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham about seed—that He was speaking, namely: Isaac’s descendants (“children of the promise”).¹²

When Abraham could not have children by Sarah, he took Sarah’s maidservant Hagar and had a son by her. This looks very much like a human expedient adopted in an attempt to bring about the desired result when the divine promise did not look as if it were being fulfilled (and thus aptly described as “of the flesh”). Paul is saying that it is not children like this that are the children of God. On the contrary (the strong adversative again), it is the children of the promise, an unusual expression, conveying the idea of children born as a result of a promise and pointing to the fact that Isaac was born as a result of God’s promise to Abraham. He could not have been born without divine intervention. His descendants may thus realistically be characterized in terms of promise. They are regarded as Abraham’s offspring (“will count as the true descendants”, JB). It is only the fact that God so reckons them that makes them significant. Physical descent from Abraham is not enough.¹³

God did not choose to bless Isaac, after his birth, only because he was Abraham’s son. Rather He promised Abraham, before Isaac’s birth, that He would provide and bless a son for the patriarch supernaturally (“at this time”). His unusual birth confirmed God’s choice of Isaac, as the channel of special blessing, to his parents.¹⁴

¹¹ Moo

¹² Constable

¹³ Morris

¹⁴ Constable

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In verse 6 Paul spoke of differences in Israel, and in verse 7 of differences in Abraham’s descendants; now he sees differences in Isaac’s posterity. Nothing human binds God. A case could be made for justifying the choice of Isaac and not Ishmael, for Isaac was the son of Abraham’s wife, Ishmael the son of a slave girl. But Jacob and Esau had the same father and mother and were of the same pregnancy. The only possible difference was that Esau was born a little before Jacob (which would give him a certain priority according to human measurement). But it was Jacob whom God chose.¹⁵

Three particulars in the scriptural story about God’s choice of Jacob over Esau provide Paul with powerful support for his insistence that covenant participation comes only as the result of God’s call. First, Jacob and Esau shared the same father and mother. This silences the objector who might argue that Isaac was preferred over Ishmael simply because they had different mothers. Second, God promised that Jacob would be preeminent before the twins were born, implying (as I will argue) that it was God’s will alone, and not natural capacity, religious devotion, or even faith that determined their respective destinies. Third, Jacob’s being the younger of the two makes it even more clear that normal human preferences had nothing to do with God’s choice...Paul would then be highlighting the utter lack of natural distinguishing characteristics separating Jacob and Esau. Born of the same mother, sharing the same father, and conceived at the same point in time, neither of the twins had a better claim to the divine promise as a birthright than the other.¹⁶

In his sovereignty God determined that was the way it would be. This confirms the divine purpose that election depends not upon what we may do but upon God’s calling. Neither national heritage nor personal merit has anything to do with the sovereign freedom of God in assigning priority. This accords with the testimony of Scripture, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Mal 1:2–3). This should not be interpreted to mean that God actually hated Esau. The strong contrast is a Semitic idiom that heightens the comparison by stating it in absolute terms. Paul was not building a case for salvation that in no way involves the consent of the individual. Nor was he teaching double predestination. Rather he was arguing that the exclusion of so many Jews from the family of God did not constitute a failure on God’s part to maintain his covenant relationship with Israel. He had not broken his promise to the descendants of Abraham.¹⁷

¹⁵ Morris

¹⁶ Moo

¹⁷ Mounce

