

Romans: Can God's Promises Fail?

Romans 9:6-13

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If you have your Bibles with you I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 9 as we continue to work through this great passage together. I'll remind you that last week we saw a glimpse into Paul's own heart of compassion and that's very important for us to remember today for a couple of reasons. For one we need to remember that the apostle, as convinced as he is of the sovereignty of God, there's no one ever who has been more diligent in working for the conversion of Israel. You remember he refers to this in the book of Romans and it said about him in Luke's account of his ministry in the book of Acts that his whole philosophy was to preach to the Jew first and also to the Greek. The Apostle loved Israel and he worked hard to see the conversion of his own people. It was his primary strategy. First to go to the synagogue and proclaim the word of truth from the Scriptures, and then to go to those God-fearers and Gentiles who might be somewhere in the area of those synagogues, all across Asia Minor, and share the word of truth. So he was a man who believed in God's sovereignty and yet who worked very hard for the conversion of his people.

Secondly it's important for us to remember his heart for Israel because in the verses to come, not only verses 6 through 13 that we'll study in just a few moments, but through the rest of this chapter, Paul says some things that are very difficult to take in. It's not that they are hard to understand it's just that they are difficult to swallow. Some very godly Christians wrestle with swallowing the full force of the truth that Paul metes out in Romans chapter 9 and it's important for us to go back and remember his heart of compassion. He had been shown his sin and he knew the grace and mercy of God, and because of this he was able to be compassionate to those who resisted the word and those who rejected the word. His heart was for them to be found and saved, and should ours be as well.

So, as we look at this passage let me give you a brief outline. In the very first words of verse 6, the first half, we're going to see Paul put a question. Now he doesn't put it in a question form, but he's putting a question out before our minds. He's already raised this question in verses 1 through 5. Then in the second half of verse 6, down to verse 8, he gives his answer, his elongated answer to that

question. The answer to the question is actually implicit even in the very phrase that he gives us in at the beginning of verse 6, but he gives sort of an expanded answer from the end of verse 6 down to verse 8. Then in verse 11 he gives us an explanation of why his answer is the case. He gives us an explanation of the basis of the answer that he has given in verse 6. And then finally, in the whole passage from the end of verse 6 down to verse 13 he gives three examples from the Bible that prove his case. That's the outline of what we're going to do together today, so let's turn our attention to God's word in Romans chapter 9 beginning in verse 6.

Romans 9:6-13

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired work. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, there are many of us here for whom the truths of this passage have been precious and encouraging. We ask that You would teach us then a fresh of the greatness of Your grace as we recount them. There are others, however, who have been disturbed, their hearts have been troubled, they love You, yet their hearts have been troubled by the truths of this passage. Comfort their hearts and show Yourself to be gracious in such a way that they are lead to praise you. In Jesus name we ask it. Amen.

You look out on the world and you see some people, some incredibly intelligent and wise and talented and lovely people who've never heard the gospel. They've never sat under the preaching of the gospel, they've never seen the Bible, or read the Bible regularly. And then you look out on the world and there are others who have heard the gospel, and some have embraced it and some have rejected it. And you wonder, why? Why is it that lovely and intelligent and talented and gifted people would never hear the gospel, why would this be? Why would God allow this to happen? You look out on the world and you see some people who hear the gospel and they embrace it. It may be the first time they have heard it, and they embrace they gospel truth and they love the Lord Jesus Christ with all their hearts and trust in Him, and the other people who have heard the gospel over and over and over and over again reject it. And you ask yourself the question, why? Why would it be that some people with the same opportunities and the same advantages would hear the gospel and reject it while others embrace it. You look out on the church; perhaps it's a Bible-believing church; perhaps it's a church where the word of God is preached faithfully and where the people of God rejoice in Him and encourage one another to live in the ways of the Lord. And yet even in the church, you see some who are true believers and they trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, they love Him with all their heart. And then there are others who just are going through the motions, and they really bear no evidence, no fruit, no marks in their life that they've ever tasted of God's grace and you wonder, why? The same opportunities are there. They're under the same preaching of the word. Why the difference?

You see, the Apostle Paul is answering that question in this great passage. He's going to answer it by starting with another question first, but it's that question that Paul is getting to here in Romans 9, but especially here in Romans 9 verses 6 through 13. And I'd like to walk through this passage with you and see how Paul answers that question. As we said, he answers that question of why is it that some embrace God and others reject Him. He answers that question by tackling another thorny question, and you'll see that question at the beginning of verse 6.

The question is basically, has God's word of promise to Israel failed? You see, there is a specific historical situation that leads Paul to ask some questions about God's ways and purposes and plans. In verses 1 through 5, Paul has indicated, and he has raised the issue of the rejection of Jesus the Messiah by the people of Israel. He said his heart breaks over it. He mourns for his people. He even wishes he could take his peoples' punishments if only they would embrace Jesus as Messiah, and that's a problem that many New Testament writers are aware of. If you have your Bibles, I'd ask you to turn to John chapter 1. In the introduction to John's gospel, before he tells you about the incredible life and ministry and deeds and works and saving acts of the Lord Jesus Christ, before he gets to it, in the middle of the prologue in verses 10 and 11, he pauses to say something absolutely flabbergasting. He says this, "He," speaking of the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, the word of God incarnate, "He was in the world and the world was made through Him and the world did not know Him." He sets up this paradox: He made the world, but the world doesn't recognize Him doesn't embrace Him, doesn't know Him, doesn't love Him, doesn't follow Him, doesn't trust Him.

But it gets worse. Look at verse 11. "He came to His own and those who were His own did not receive Him. You see what John's saying? Jesus the Messiah was of Israel. By the flesh He was an Israelite, indeed a son of David. Yet the sons of David turned their back on Him. They rejected him. See, John knows the tension of this, those glorious promises made to Israel of old, made to Abraham, made to Isaac, and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and David and Jeremiah. And yet when the Messiah comes, the people of Israel reject Him, by in large they reject Him. Oh yes, there are the disciples and there are exceptions to that rule, but by and large they reject Him and it's this problem, this question that Paul is raising.

Since this is the case, does that mean that God's promises have failed? Have God's promises to Israel failed? And you see, even the way Paul phrases the first part of verse 6 gives you his answer. No! It is not as though the word of God has failed. But you see the issue that he's tackling. How do you square God's covenant promises to Israel, and Israel's unbelief? How do they go together? How do you square God making promises to Israel and yet Israel rejecting the promises? Has God's word failed? And so Paul's reference here is to this alleged failure of God's word and it relates to this problem of the Jewish rejection of Jesus the Messiah and His answer to the question, "Is there a problem with

God's promises" is an emphatic, "NO! God's promises have not failed."

It is that question, you see, that leads Paul to talk to you and me about God's sovereignty in salvation. It's the question of what in the world happened in Israel that lead him to talk with us about the sovereignty and the mercy of God in salvation. It's that historical question that leads us into the issue of God's election. And that's exactly where Paul takes you. In verses 6 through 8, you'll see his answer to that question. We said we'd look at the question and then the answer.

I. God's promises have not failed.

Verses 6 through 8 are the first part of his answer to that question, have God's promises failed? "No," he said, "Let me explain why." And look what he says, "It's not as though the word of God has failed, for they are not Israel who are descended from Israel." You see Paul's response. No, God's promises have not failed because not all Israel is Israel. Now you're saying, what in the world does that mean? So he says it three different ways for you. He starts off in verse 6 by saying that not all Israel is Israel, then in verse 7 he says, nor are they children because they are Abraham's descendants, and then in verse 8 He says, but not all the children of the flesh are also children of God or children of the promise. So he says the same thing three different ways just to make sure he's clear.

What's he saying? He's saying this, that the covenant promises of God have always found their fulfillment in a subset of the people of Israel. The covenant promises of God to Israel have never in the history of time been fulfilled in such a way that every last Israelite was counted a child of God. But in fact, there has always been a remnant, there has always been a believing group within God's people. There is the external community, many of whom simply go through the motion and there is within that external community many who truly trust in the living God, have rested on His promises, have believed His promises, and enjoyed the blessing of His salvation. And in each of the phrases that he uses you see an echo of his teaching or of John's teaching in other parts in the Bible.

For instance, when Paul says, "Not all Israel is Israel" doesn't that remind you of something else he said earlier in the book of Romans. Maybe you can't remember back that far, but if you'll turn back to Romans chapter 2 verse 28 and 29, you'll remember that even there Paul had said this, " He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is the circumcision that which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew, who is one inwardly and the circumcision is that which is of the heart by this spirit, not by the letter and his praise is not from men, but from God." He's making it clear that it doesn't matter whether you're a physical Israelite, unless your heart has been changed. The promises of God are fulfilled upon those Israelites whose hearts have responded to the promise of the Lord. They are Jews inwardly as well as outwardly, and so you see that distinction, not all Israel

is Israel. There are some who embrace the promises and some who don't.

II. Not all the physical descendants are children of promise.

Then he says again in verse 7 that not all the descendants are children. Doesn't that remind you of a dialogue that Jesus had with the Pharisees or with some of their followers in John chapter 8. Turn with me there. John 8 beginning in verse 33 all the way down to verse 44, we won't read the whole section, but we'll read some snippets of it. You remember what's going on. Jesus is talking about what it means to be a true disciple, a true follower of Him. Really He's talking about what it means to be true Israel. And in the course of the conversation He offends these people and they say, what do you mean that we need to be set free? We've always been free. Children of Abraham have always been free. And in verse 33 they say to Him, we're descendants of Abraham. And you see what happens over the next few verses. Jesus says, " Oh I know you're descendants of Abraham, but you're trying to kill Me and Abraham wouldn't have done that. And therefore, by your deeds, you're showing Me who your father is." And you see what he says in verse 44. By the way, your father is the devil. You're descendants of Abraham, but your father is the devil. Not all Israel is Israel. See what Paul's saying here in Romans chapter 9? Not all descendants are children. They may be physical descendants, but it doesn't mean they're truly trusting or receiving the promises of God.

Then he has another image to share with you. Not all children of the flesh are children of God, or children of the promise. Go to Galatians 4:22 through 28 where he contrasts those descended from Hagar and Ishmael with those descended from Sara and Isaac. And he says, Isaac is the child of promise, and you, speaking to believers, you are sons of the promise, you are children of the promise just like Isaac. There's a difference, there's a difference between those two. And so he makes it clear that not all Israel is Israel. This is vital because it is clear that the Kingdom of God is not inherited by physical descent. There may be great promises given to the people of God in that regard, but the kingdom of God is not inherited by mere physical descent.

This of course reminds us that church membership cannot save us either. You can be a part of the visible community as all within Israel were and yet not have a heart for God and never experience His saving work. We must be in vital saving relationship with God. Church membership ought to flow from that saving relationship. It's one of the great privileges and duties of those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, but it doesn't cause salvation. We can sit in church Lord's day after Lord's day and never embrace the promises or the warnings and not be in a vital saving relationship with God, and this passage is a warning about just that. Paul says, "No the promises of God haven't failed," because always there have been some within Israel who trusted and rested in Him, then there have been others who have not.

Now, Paul in verse 11 explains why this is. And you might expect him to do something like this, you might expect him to say the difference is faith, the difference is some have faith in Jesus Christ and some don't. That would be perfectly appropriate for the Apostle Paul to do. In fact later on in verses 30 through 33 he'll talk about that, and in Romans 10 verses 1 through 14, he'll talk about faith. Paul loved to talk about faith. But isn't it interesting that he doesn't mention it in verse 11 now when he wants to explain to you why it is that not all Israel is Israel and why it is that God's promises have not come to bare on all of Israel and why it is that some have rejected Him and some have Him. He goes right to the source, the choice and the sovereignty of God. He mentions nothing about us or what we do. Look what he does in verse 11 as he explains to us the basis of this distinction. Why the distinction? Why the distinction within Israel, why Isaac and Ishmael? Why Jacob and Esau? Why the distinction between these? And Paul gives a stunning answer. The difference, he says, is not to be found in deeds of works, it's not to be found in foreseen deeds or works, rather it's to be found in God's choice. The distinction within the visible covenant community is in order to display God's purpose and choice. Phil Ryken puts it this way, "Notice God's reason for choosing Jacob in verse 11. It was in order that God's purpose and election might stand. God chose Jacob in order to teach the mystery of election that God is sovereign in dispensing His mercy. Even before birth He predestines those who will receive His saving grace and Jacob was chosen for the very purpose of demonstrating that God's grace is God's choice. Paul's answer in verse 11 over and over emphasizes God. Three times. God's choice. God's purpose. God's calling. That's Paul's answer. There's more to say, but that's all that Paul has to say here. So keep your eye on the ball.

Let me ask you this question. Does that bother you? Does it grate just a little bit, does it make you mad? Do you immediately recoil from it? Is your instinct to recoil from that answer? If it is, be certain that you're not recoiling from the words of man, you're recoiling from what God says through the Apostle Paul. It may be uncomfortable, but it is absolutely indisputably clear what he's saying. The difference goes back to God's purpose and God's choice. Paul is determined to show that every possible human factor is excluded as the basis of the action of God. And my friends, if you are resisting that particular teaching of Paul, if you are resisting that Bible truth, let me say that you're missing out on a very precious and comforting teaching of God's word, because by emphasizing this Paul is making it clear that God's grace does not find its origins in us. God's grace is not compelled by something in us or by something that we do, but God's grace is self-originating. God's love falls upon us out of the infinite bounds of His own heart of compassion and it's not moved by something that we have done and hence it can not be turned away because of something that we do. God's grace is pursuing and before that foundation of the world he has set his love on us. Toplady sings about that in that wonderful hymn of his, *How Vast The Benefits Divine*. Turn to hymn number 470. He expresses the same truth. "How vast the benefits divine, which we in Christ possess we are redeemed from guilt

and shame and called to holiness, but not for works which we have done or shall here after do hath God decreased on sinful men salvation to bestow." In other words, God's shown us this grace, but it's not because of works that we have done, and it's not because of works that we will do, it's because of His mercy. His grace, God's choice shows his grace and his grace is his choice.

Now Paul knows that's hard to swallow, so he gives you three bible proofs of it. In verses 6 through 13 he shows you three Old Testament characters in order to give you evidence to make it clear again that he's not making this up as he goes along, that it's just something that he learned as a little Hebrew boy reading his Bible. He first tells you about Abraham. Now was Abraham a great man of faith, a worshiper of the one true God? No he was a idol worshipping Mesopotamian. And God called him out of that and made him into a trophy of grace and then he goes from Abraham to Isaac and he says, "Look at Isaac. I've chosen Isaac. He wasn't the first born," and then you immediately retort, "Yeah yeah, but Isaac's mom was Sara and Ishmael's mom was Hagar. That's the reason for the difference." So Paul says, "Ok let's think about Jacob and let's think about Esau. They had the same mother. Yet before they were born, before they had either done good or evil God chose the second born Jacob. To be the recipient of his promise. God is sovereign in the bestowal in His mercy."

Phil Ryken explains it this way. "Having stated the general principle in verse 6, that not every Israelite was among the elect, Paul proceeds to give examples and he describes three generations of patriarchs. The first was Abraham. He himself is an example of divine election for at the time God called him he was still worshipping idols. So Abraham did not choose God, God chose him. Then Abraham had two sons Isaac and Ishmael, the next generation; where they both saved? No. God told Abraham that his spiritual children would only come through Isaac and not through Ishmael. The reason was that although Ishmael was his natural born child, he did not have God's promise. Isaac was the chosen one. That was a pretty good example, however, even Isaac could not prove Paul's case because Ishmael was a half-breed. His mother was an Egyptian.

Perhaps then the reason Isaac was chosen was an accident of birth, and so in verse 10 Paul moves on to the next generation — Jacob and Esau. This was the clincher because they had the same mother. They were twins with nothing to chose between them and yet even before they were born, before they has done anything right and wrong, God chose Jacob and not Esau. He discriminated between them, He gave preferential treatment, which is what the Bible means when it says, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' Jacobs's election did not depend on his godliness, it didn't even depend on his birthright. Esau was the first born, never the less Jacob was the son of God's choice. Paul's meaning is unmistakable. Election is not based on anything in the elect themselves, but on the mercy of God."

Now my friend, I'm perfectly aware that there are some who fear that some that

such a teaching will lead us to spiritual pride, but such a teaching, apprehended by God's Holy Spirit in fact, produces the opposite. Turn to the hymn we are going to sing at the end of the service, number 469. See, Isaac Watts understood this and he draws this picture of what we're going to do at the Lamb's Supper as we're gathered, and the Lord Jesus Christ has clothed himself again as He's going to feed His people the marriage supper of the lamb. And he pictures us sitting there and asking a question. He pictures our hearts being full with the mercies of salvation and look at the second stanza, "While all our hearts and all our songs join to admire the feast, each of us cries with thankful tongue, 'Lord why was I a guest?'"

You see the question is not, "Why is he not a guest?" the question is "Why am I a guest?" This is the confession of the believer that he doesn't deserve this. He doesn't deserve this kind of mercy and he's so aware of it. Look at the third stanza, "Why was I made to hear Your voice and enter while there's room, when thousands make a wretched choice and rather starve than come?"

If salvation is all of grace, than I do not have the shred of a stick of a plank on which to base my pride for it's all of God's doing, it's all of grace. And so God's sovereignty serves to demonstrate His grace. Let's Pray.

Our Lord and our God help us to see Your grace in Your sovereign rule and in Your electing love. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

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