

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **Distinguishing Grace**

*Romans 9:6-13*

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# Distinguishing Grace

## Scripture

Last week, in Romans 9:1-5, we saw a glimpse into Paul's heart of compassion, as he expressed concern for his fellow Israelites. And that's important to remember for a couple of reasons.

First, we need to remember that the Apostle Paul, as convinced as he was of the sovereignty of God, worked more diligently than anyone else for the conversion of the Israelites. Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Acts tells us that his philosophy was to preach to the Jew first and then to the Gentiles. That was Paul's primary strategy. He believed in God's sovereignty, and yet he worked very hard for the conversion of his own people, the Israelites.

Second, it's important for us to remember his compassion for the Israelites because in the verses to come, not only in Romans 9:6-13 that we'll study today, but throughout the rest of this chapter, Paul says some things that are very difficult for us. 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 Paul's teaching in Romans 9, and it's important for us to remember Paul's heart of compassion for the lost people of Israel.

Paul had been shown his sin, and he knew the grace of God. And because of this he was able to be compassionate to those who resisted and rejected the word of God. His desire was for them to be saved. And this should be our desire as well.

Let's read Romans 9:6-13:

**<sup>6</sup>But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, <sup>7</sup>and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but <sup>8</sup>“Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” <sup>8</sup>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.<sup>9</sup> For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”<sup>10</sup> And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,<sup>11</sup> 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—<sup>12</sup>she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”<sup>13</sup> As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:6-13)

## Introduction

As you look out on the world, you see some incredibly intelligent and wise and talented and lovely people who have never heard the gospel. They’ve never sat under the preaching of the gospel, they’ve never seen a Bible, or known the grace of God personally and savingly.

And then there are others who have heard the gospel. 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 have never heard the gospel? Why would this be? Why would God allow this to happen?

And why is that some people who hear the gospel embrace it? It may be the first time they have heard it, but they embrace the gospel and they love the Lord Jesus Christ with all their hearts and trust in him.

And some people who have heard the gospel over and over again reject it.

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?

This is the question that the Apostle Paul is answering in this great passage. I’d like to walk through this passage with you and see how Paul answers that question. He answers the question of

why it is that some embrace God and others reject him.

Paul answers this question by tackling another thorny issue, and you'll see that issue at the beginning of verse 6.

The issue is basically this: *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 purposes and plans. In verses 1 through 5, Paul raises 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' punishment if only they would trust in Jesus.

Has God's promises to Israel failed? Paul is clear: No! **It is not as though the word of God has failed.**

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."

## Lesson

It is that issue, you see, that leads Paul to teach us about God's sovereignty in salvation. It's the issue of what happened to Israel that leads him to teach us about the sovereignty of God in salvation. It's that historical issue that leads us into the issue of God's distinguishing grace in salvation.

### I. **God's Promises Have Not Failed (9:6-8)**

Verses 6 through 8 are the first part of the answer to Paul's question: Has God's promises failed?

“No,” Paul says, “And let me explain why.”

Look at what he says, **“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel”** (9:6). God’s promises have not failed because not all Israel is Israel.

Now you’re saying, “What in the world does that mean?” So Paul says it in three different ways for us. He starts off in verse 6 by saying that **not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.**

Then in verse 7 he says, **“And not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.”**

And then in verse 8 he says, **“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.”**

So Paul says the same thing three different ways just to make sure he’s clear.

But what’s he saying? He’s saying 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 been fulfilled in such a way that every last Israelite was counted a child of God.

There has always been a remnant. There has always been a believing group within God’s covenant people. There is the external community, many of whom simply go through the motions. And there is within that external community many who truly trust in the living God, many who rest on his promises, and many who enjoy the blessing of his salvation.

When Paul says, **“For not all who are descended from Israel belong to 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 2:28-29, you’ll remember that even there Paul said this, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

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 in those Israelites whose hearts have responded to the promise of the Lord.

They are Jews inwardly as well as outwardly, and so you see the distinction that **not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.**

Some embrace the promises of God, and some don't.

## **II. Not All Physical Descendants Are Children of Promise (9:7-13)**

Then Paul says in verse 7, **“And not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.”**

Doesn't that remind you of a dialogue that Jesus had with the Pharisees and some of their followers in John 8:33-44?

You remember what's going on. Jesus is talking about what it means to be a true disciple, a true follower of his. He's really talking about what it means to be a true Israelite. And in the course of the conversation he offends the Pharisees, and they say in verse 33, “We are offspring of Abraham.”

Jesus says to them, “Oh, I know you're Abraham's descendants, 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 in verse 44 Jesus basically says, “By the way, your father is the devil. You're descendants of Abraham, but your father is the devil. Not all Israel is Israel.”

That is what Paul is saying here in Romans 9:7. Not all descendants are children. They may be physical descendants, but it doesn't mean that they're truly trusting in God.

Then Paul continues. He says in verse 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.”**

In Galatians 4:22-28 Paul contrasts those descended from Hagar and Ishmael with those descended from Sarah and Isaac.

And basically 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 between those two. 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.

You must be in a 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. You can sit in a worship service Sunday after Sunday and never embrace the promises, and not be in a vital saving relationship with God.

This passage is a warning about just that. Paul says, “No, the promises of God haven’t failed,” because there have always been some within Israel who trusted and rested in him, and then there have been others who have not trusted and rested in him.

Now, in verse 11 Paul explains why this is so. And you might expect him to say something like this: the difference is faith. The difference is that some have faith in Jesus Christ and some don’t have faith in Jesus Christ. That would be perfectly appropriate for the Apostle Paul to say. But he doesn’t.

Isn’t it interesting that he doesn’t mention it in verse 11 now when he wants to explain why it is that not all Israel is Israel, and why it is that some have rejected him and some have accepted him. He goes right to the source, which is 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 distinguishing grace. Why does God choose one and not the other? Why is there a distinction in the grace of God? Paul gives a

stunning answer. The difference, he says, is not to be found in our deeds or our works. It's not to be found in our foreseen deeds or our merit. Rather it's to be found in God's choice.

Notice God's reason for choosing Jacob in verse 11. It was **in order that God's purpose of election might continue**. God chose Jacob in order to teach the mystery of election that God is sovereign in dispensing his grace. 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. God's choice. God's purpose. God's calling. That is Paul's answer. There's more to say, but that's all that Paul has to say here.

Let me ask you this question. Does that bother you? Does it grate you just a little bit? Does it make you mad? Do you 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 and 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 for the action of God.

And 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 God's distinguishing grace Paul is making it clear that God's grace does not find its origin in us.

God's grace is not compelled by something in us or by something that we do. 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 cannot be turned away because of something that we do. God's grace is pursuing and, before the foundation of the world, he has set his love on us.



Augustus Toplady states it this way in that wonderful hymn, *How Vast the Benefits Divine*:

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 hereafter do,  
hath God decreed on sinful men  
salvation to bestow.

In other words, God has 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 grace. God's choice shows his grace, and his grace is his choice.

Now Paul knows that's hard to swallow, so he gives three proofs of it. In verses 6 through 13 he shows three Old Testament characters in order to give us evidence to make it clear again that he's not making this up as he goes along.

He first tells us about Abraham. Now was Abraham originally a great man of faith, a worshiper of the one true God? No. He was an idol-worshiping Mesopotamian. And God called him out of that and made him into a trophy of grace.

And then Paul goes from Abraham to Isaac and he says, "Look at Isaac. God chose Isaac. He wasn't the firstborn." And you immediately respond, "Yes, but Isaac's mother was Sarah and Ishmael's mother was Hagar. That's the reason for the difference."

So Paul says, "Okay! Let's think about Jacob and Esau. They had the same mother. Yet before they were born, before either one had done any good or evil, God chose the second-born Jacob to be the recipient of his promise. God is sovereign in the bestowal of his grace."

You see, 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 Abraham.

Then Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, the next generation. Were 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 firstborn child, he did not have God's promise. Isaac was the chosen one.

In verse 10 Paul moves on to the next generation—Jacob and Esau. This was the clincher because they both had the same mother. They were twins with nothing to choose between them and yet even before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, God chose Jacob and not Esau. He discriminated between the two of them.

He gave preferential treatment to one and not to the other, which is what the Bible means when it says, **“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”** (9:13). Jacobs's election did not depend on his godliness. It didn't even depend on his birthright. Esau was the firstborn. Nevertheless 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 distinguishing grace of God.

## Conclusion

Now, I'm perfectly aware that there are some who fear that this kind of teaching will lead us to spiritual pride, but such a teaching, properly understood by the work of the God's Holy Spirit, in fact produces just the opposite.

Isaac Watts understood this and he draws this picture of what we're going to do at the Lamb's Supper in heaven as we are gathered there. The Lord Jesus Christ is going to feed his people at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. And he pictures us sitting there and asking a question. He pictures our hearts being full with the grace of salvation, and he says,

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 my unconverted neighbor or friend not a guest?” The question is, “Why am *I* a guest?”

This is the confession of the believer: he knows that he doesn’t deserve this. He doesn’t deserve this kind of grace and he’s so aware of it. And Watts continues and has the Christian asking,

“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 a shred of merit 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 distinguishing grace. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAAYER:**

Taken from Ray Ortlund's *A Passion for God*:

O God, I did not decide whether I would be favored or excluded. You did. Behind, within and around my choice of you was your prior choice of me. All rights are yours. All entitlements are yours. All power is yours. I exist for you. I exist by you. I exist under you. O awesome God, I stand only by your mercy. With the saints of old, I make haste to bow low in worship. I abase myself before you. I yield to you. I despise myself, compared with you. I am not the center of reality with you as my servant, but you are the center of reality and I am your servant.

O Sovereign Master, O Most High, I rest in your sovereign decree of love, which makes me as secure in Christ as I am helpless in myself.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.