

Election, God's Gracious Choice

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Today we are looking at what is probably one of the most controversial topics that we can discuss in the Word of God. And I have mentioned this. I think it is important that we discuss everything that the Word of God has to say. And that is why I like to go through books of the Bible.

The topic we are looking at today is one that I have only heard preached on this particular passage in Romans nine, I have only heard—apart from my own sermons on it—one sermon on Romans nine in my entire years as a Christian. It is one that tends to be avoided because it is a difficult one to deal with.

So as we look at it today keep that in mind. I have actually seen churches split over issues that are brought up in this particular chapter. However, I am saying that for a purpose because I believe that the truth that is expressed here is so important and so blessed that it can affect in a wonderful and dramatic way the lives of believers who grab a hold of it and recognize it as the wonderful truth of God that it is.

Romans chapter nine is an interesting passage in that it is one in which the apostle Paul is dealing with a question that comes up in his writing of the book of Romans. All along he has been talking about God's wonderful blessing that is provided in the Lord Jesus Christ. And as he gets to the end of chapter eight the thought comes to his mind—given to him, of course, by the Spirit of God—well, what about the nation of Israel? Why is it that, in fact, it doesn't seem as if a high percentage of Jewish people in his day—and we could say even in our day—have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ? Isn't that a problem, Paul is saying, because God had made a commitment to the children of Israel. God had made a promise. There was a covenant that he had established with Israel. Why is it, then, that we find that very few among the people of Israel have come to trust him as Savior and Lord?

And as he goes into this topic he deals with God's selection, choice or election of human beings and explains to us that just because people are of the race of Abraham does not mean that they are true Jews because God in his infinite wisdom has made a selection among people.

This is what he says:

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.¹

And then he goes on to explain. “But it is not as though the word of God has failed.”²

You see, here is the question that he has. God made all these promises and commitments to Israel. Is there failure in God’s Word because the multitude of people in Israel have not trusted him? And he answers, “No, that is not the case.”

But why is it not the case? He is going to go on here and talk to us about the truth of election in the Word of God. Election is a word that literally means choice or selection and it has the idea of God selecting people, of God’s choice of specific individuals.

Now this is clearly taught, I think, in the Scriptures. And I am just going to jump around to a few passages to give us an idea of how it is used before we get into the discussion of this particular doctrine in the book of Romans and in chapter nine.

In Psalm chapter 33 it says in the 12th verse—we all know this verse, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, The people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance.”³ What he is saying here: Of all the nations on the face of the earth God made a selection. God chose Israel. Why did he choose Israel? I have no idea. He doesn’t tell us. In fact, in passages in the Word of God he lets us know that Israel was not the greatest nation. They were not a people who were holy or righteous before him when he selected them. But he chose them simply because he chose them.

The same idea, I think, is brought out in Matthew chapter 22 where he says in the 14th verse, “For many are called, but few are chosen.”⁴ God makes a choice. God has chosen a few.

The same way in the passage that we read last week in Romans chapter eight it says in the 33rd verse, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?”⁵ The word “elect” means chosen. Who will bring a charge against the ones whom God has chosen?

And so we go to Colossians and in the third chapter in the 12th verse we read, “And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion...”⁶

¹ Romans 9:1-5

² Romans 9:6

³ Psalm 33:12

⁴ Matthew 22:14

⁵ Romans 8:33

and so on and so forth. We, if we are Christians, in fact, have been chosen of God. That is what the passage tells us.

In 1 Peter chapter two we read in the ninth verse, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.”⁷ He is talking about believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that somehow we who are Christians have been chosen by God.

And then, finally, in Revelation in chapter 17 and verse 14 we read, “These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.”⁸

I just made a choice of...that’s funny, made a choice. Anyway, I just made a choice of passages. I could have picked another 30 or 40 passages to teach exactly the same thing. For consistently throughout the Word of God we are taught that somehow God has made a choice.

In the book of Ephesians we find that that choice was one that was made before creation even took place. In the book of Ephesians chapter one and verse four it says, “Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.”⁹

And in the book of Revelation, interestingly enough, when it talks about the book of life we find out that the book of life—including those who are saved and those who are listed in it—was established even before creation. Listen to this in Revelation chapter 13 and verse eight we read this. “And all who dwell on the earth will worship him.”¹⁰ This, of course, is talking about the beast. “And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.”¹¹ From the foundation of the world the names of those who are God’s were written in the book of life.

It is not as if there is some surprise that God has and when someone trusts in Christ his name becomes written in that book. No. His name was there from before the foundation of the world.

And then the last passage in this regard is in Revelation, again, chapter 17 and verse eight. “The beast that you saw was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth will wonder, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.”¹² There are those whose names are written in the book of life, those whose names have not been written in the book of life. But the issue is: All of this happened from before the foundation of the world.

⁶ Colossians 3:12

⁷ 1 Peter 2:9

⁸ Revelation 17:14

⁹ Ephesians 1:4

¹⁰ Revelation 13:8

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Revelation 17:8

There are, as we search the Scriptures, things that we view and sometimes might even look at as even seemingly to be contradicting one another. We know there are no contradictions in the Scriptures and yet when we read some things they seem to contradict other passages. And I think one of the important things for us to understand is that we don't know everything. So when I read the Word of God and I see things that seem to contradict I say, "Lord, I don't understand how that fits with that. But I am going to believe both of them because you said both of them."

A perfect example of that in one verse is in Acts chapter two where we read in the 23rd verse, "This man..."¹³ Now it is talking about the Lord Jesus Christ. "This Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God..."¹⁴ Ok. How was he delivered up? Because God planned it ahead of time, right? It says, "predetermined plan."¹⁵ God made the decision that Jesus Christ would be delivered up and would die on the cross of Calvary. It is God's plan. Nothing could change it because God planned it.

But let's read the rest of the verse, "You nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."¹⁶ Well, who is responsible for it? Human beings did it.

Now when you read that verse you say, "Gosh, the first part of the verse seems to contradict the second part of the verse." God planned it. It's in God's plan. He is the one that predetermined that this was going to happen. But then we read on and it says, but, no it is was wicked men who did it. It was their choice.

So which is it? God's elective power, his predestination or is it the free will of man?

Do you know what the answer is? It's both of them.

And you ask me how do I reconcile the two? Beats me. I don't have the vaguest idea, but I know they are both true.

The great preacher—Baptist preacher, by the way—Spurgeon, he was asked a question one time. He said, "How do you reconcile election or God's choice with man's free will? How do you reconcile them?"

Do you know what his answer was? He says, "I don't. You don't have to reconcile friends." In other words, what he was saying is: Here are two truths. I believe them. They seem to contradict one another. And when I get to heaven I will figure it out because God will explain it to me.

I know of one theologian who explained it this way. He said that when I stand at the gate of heaven the sign outside will say, "Whosoever will may come," and I can enter. But

¹³ Acts 2:23

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

when I get in the gate and turn around and I look at the other side of the door it will say, "Chosen in him before the foundation of the world."

Can I reconcile them? Don't have to. They are friends. The Word of God says both of them.

Well, now in Romans chapter nine we face this issue head long. In Romans nine—and I gave this very long introduction on purpose because, as I said, this is a teaching of Scripture that we very rarely hear about and I really wanted to get into some background of the teaching of this portion of the Word of God.

The Word of God tells us that in what we just read that they are not all Israel who are descendants of Abraham.¹⁷ Just because they are a descendant of Abraham does not make them the real Israel. There were those who were descendants of Abraham who rejected the truth of God and who are not in the line and did not come to a personal relationship with God. In fact, he makes a very clear distinction in here between...well, let's read the passage beginning in verse six.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named."¹⁸

Remember there was Isaac and there was Esau. But God said only through the line of Isaac will the true descendants be called. What about Esau? Well, he was pushed aside. He was not one through whom the line leading to the Savior would come.

In verse eight, then:

That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is a word of promise: "at this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son."¹⁹

God says, "I made a choice. It's Isaac, not Ishmael through whom the line will come."

And then we read on. It says:

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice [or election] might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls,²⁰

¹⁷ See Romans 9:6

¹⁸ Romans 9:6-7

¹⁹ Romans 9:8-9

²⁰ Romans 9:10-11

Now we have to understand what the Lord is saying here. He said, here was a situation where this woman, Rebekah, was expecting twins. There was nothing good or bad about either one of them. They hadn't been born yet. They hadn't done anything. But God says, "I am going to pick one and I am not going to pick the other." That is what the passage says.

And we go on and it says in verse 12:

It was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."²¹

Immediately we are going to say, "Gosh, what's...it doesn't sound right, does it?" I mean, how can we understand that God would choose one and not choose the other and that God says, "I love this one, but I hate this one"?

Well, if you want to understand that, then you are going to have to wait until you get to heaven because I don't understand it, but I know that it is in the Word of God and it is God's decision to make a choice. It is God's decision to choose and to pick. And it is God's choice that in this case Jacob would be chosen and Esau would not.

Now it is even more interesting if you carefully read through the story of Jacob and Esau—and I am sure most of you have—you have probably noticed that Jacob was not the nicest fellow around. As a matter of fact Jacob was the deceiver. Jacob was the one who was unkind to his brother. He was the one who would sneak around to make things happen.

Esau, according to his description, was a pretty nice fellow. And had I read the story and God said to me, "Now, which one would you choose?" I probably would have picked Esau to tell you the truth.

That wasn't God's choice. He chose Jacob and Jacob, therefore, became the one who would be the line through whom the Messiah would come.

Well, you may ask, "Well, gosh, that doesn't sound fair."

Well, God in this passage explains it to us. And listen to the words that are said in verse 14. "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?"²² In other words, if I were to put that into very simple English of today, "That doesn't sound fair to me. It just doesn't sound fair. There is no injustice with God, is there?"

And the response to that is that God has a right to make a choice. This is what he says in verse 15. "For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will

²¹ Romans 9:12-13

²² Romans 9:14

have compassion on whom I have compassion.”²³ God is saying, “That’s my choice.” It’s not your choice. You can’t make that decision. Only God can do that.

“So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”²⁴

And then he goes on to say, “I am going to give you another example of that.” And he gives us the example of Pharaoh. He says: “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.”²⁵

And if you go through the book of Exodus you find that God...one passage we read that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. And in another passage we read that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

And someone will ask, “Well, which one is true?”

I think they are both true. You see, God had a purpose with Pharaoh and maybe it would be something different from our purpose, but that was God’s purpose. And it is says in verse 18, “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”²⁶

Well, the first question we asked: Could that possibly be fair?

And God answers that that’s my choice. I make those decisions. You don’t.

A second question immediately comes to mind. And the second question is: Well, if that is the case, how can he judge anybody? I mean if he is the one making the choices, if he is the one who will harden the heart of Pharaoh, how can he then judge Pharaoh?

That sounds like a logical question, doesn’t it? Well, that’s the question that we read next. It says in verse 19, “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’”²⁷ In other words, “He is the one in charge. He is doing this. Now how can he find fault with anybody?”

And do you know how he answers the question? His answer is, in essence, “Shut up. You don’t have a right to ask.” That is what he says. Listen to the words. He says this. “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?”²⁸ Well, I get scared at that one, you know, I mean...you know, in other words he is saying, “Keep quiet. You don’t have a right to ask. This isn’t your area. It’s my area,” God is saying.

²³ Romans 9:15

²⁴ Romans 9:16

²⁵ Romans 9:17

²⁶ Romans 9:18

²⁷ Romans 9:19

²⁸ Romans 9:20

And he goes on to say—and Nancy, I think, portrayed this very well in the sermon starter today, “The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ ill it?”²⁹ In other words, I go and I make something out of clay and it looks pretty decent and then I go and I make another one and it looks like a piece of junk.

Now the piece of clay that looks like a piece of junk, can you imagine if it looked at me and said, “That wasn’t very nice of you to make me like that.” It sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? Of course it does. But that is the example that God is giving.

We are the clay. God is the one who molds the clay. The clay doesn’t have a right to talk to the molder. The clay doesn’t have a right to complain that he is not satisfied with the way he was made.

This fits into a lot of areas of life. It is not just the area that is being spoken of here, the choice of God to eternal destiny. There are a lot of things.

You know, I can remember—and I think I gave you this example—I had a theology professor with a humongous nose. I think I told you about him, Dr. Rudolph. I may have said this at one time. I mean he had a nose that you would not believe. This thing was...I have never seen a nose as big as this nose. I have a big nose, but I mean, you double my nose it doesn’t begin to match this man’s nose.

Anyway, he is with the Lord right now, but I can remember one time when he was teaching on these very topics and he said one day, he said, “If you do not believe in God’s providence, look at my nose and just praise him you don’t have one like it.” That was his comment. You know, he could joke about that.

You see, I think of God’s choice of some people. And I remember one pastor in his church he had a ministry to those who were retarded and he had this young retarded man who was probably about 20 years old at the time come up on the platform. The man couldn’t say very much. He was very limited in his intellect. But the pastor said to him, “Tell me about Jesus.”

And he looked at the pastor and he said, “Jesus loves me and I love him, too.”

And the pastor said, “You know, I don’t know why God allowed this man to be born retarded, but one thing I do know that some day in heaven he will be there and many of the Ph.Ds of our day will be suffering in hell. And I’ll tell you something, I’d rather be this young man than one of them.”

You see, God makes a choice. The question that we have to ask to us: How can he judge? He says to us, “That’s not your business.”

But one of the things that we need to understand when we think of God’s electing work

²⁹ Ibid.

which means that somehow he chose us. I don't know all the details of that, but I do know that for some reason other than anything that was in me—just like Jacob and Esau, how he picked one and not the other, before their birth, before they had done anything, that he picked the one who was not the nicest guy in the world—for some reason he chose me. I don't know why. But I will tell you I am thankful. I am thankful of his choice.

In Revelation chapter one and verse five we read this.

And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.³⁰

We today need to praise the God who loved us with such a love that he reached down from heaven even before the foundation of the world and he said to me—even though I wasn't there yet—“Barry, I choose you and I love you and you will be mine for all eternity.”

And if you are a Christian he did that for you, too. How we must praise him, love him and honor him for his sovereign choice of us that we might be his.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your love and goodness and we ask, our Father, that you might help us to honor you and serve you in all that we say and do. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

³⁰ Revelation 1:5-6