

Sermon 98: Romans 9:6: The Vindication of God

OUTLINE

Jewish assumptions about salvation
God's way of salvation

INTRODUCTION

Why does God save people? Why does He not save others? This is the big question that is confronting us as we continue with our studies in Romans 9. In particular Paul is addressing this question, why do the majority of Jews not believe while the Gentiles are streaming into the Kingdom? The problem of Jewish unbelief we have said presents a major problem. God appears to be either a liar, because all of those promises to the nation of Israel in the OT appear to be going unfulfilled; or God appears weak, some might say that He wants to save them all but is not strong enough to make it happen. Paul is aware that Jewish unbelief puts God in a bad light and so writes now to vindicate/justify God. Romans 9:6 is his answer as to why God is not weak nor a liar but is making His perfect will come to pass and fulfilling all of His promises, 'But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.'

Paul's answer to the problem of Jewish unbelief is that it is intentional, God never intentioned to save all of Israel but a smaller group, an elect group, a remnant from Israel. The rest of chapter 9 flows from this one verse. Paul states his principle here that God is not saving the whole nation but only a part of it. This of course would contradict the expectations of the first century Jews who assumed that all Jews apart from those who chose to apostatize would be saved. So having stated the overarching truth of election in 9:6 he then goes on to give historical demonstrations of this principle in v7-13. There he shows how God distinguished between Ishmael and Isaac, and Jacob and Esau. No doubt Paul's statements that God elects not on the basis of race or works would upset a lot of people and raise many objections. The objections of justice and free will are anticipated in v14-23. Paul then concludes this little discussion showing that God in His sovereignty is making His perfect will and promises come to pass by saving some from both Gentiles and Jews v24-29.

Romans chapter 9 is then a storm centre for the debates around the doctrine of election. Why God saves some and not others is the very question that election focuses upon. Traditionally Romans 9 is the go-to text to prove the doctrine of free and sovereign election, the view that has been held by Augustinians, Calvinists, the Reformed, etc. This teaching is not popular and many seek to find a way around it for one reason or another. A very common way of trying to avoid the doctrine of election is to say that Romans 9 is dealing with the question of the election of nations, not the question of individual election for salvation. Because 9:13 is a quote from Mal. 1:2-3, which is dealing with the nations of Israel and Edom; and because the question Paul is dealing with is the question of Jewish unbelief and Gentile inclusion some feel that this text can be removed from the table with

regards to the question of individual election to salvation. This however cannot be sustained. It is true that Paul is discussing the question of the nation of the Jews, but we must also appreciate that Paul is distinguishing why some individual Jews are being saved and why others are not. Paul is arguing that Israel's so called 'national' election is fulfilled in the 'partial' election of Israelites to salvation in Christ. Secondly, Paul distinguishes between the individuals of Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau not the nations they represent. We have to allow Paul to be his own interpreter instead of telling him what he must mean if he quotes a particular text from the OT, even if the original context is speaking of nations and not individuals.

Jewish assumptions about salvation

In order for us to appreciate what Paul is asserting in this chapter we first need to know what the Judaism of Paul's day believed. There has been a lot of controversy over this point because Liberals have tended to exaggerate the self-saving orientation of Second Temple Judaism. Research has revealed that the religion of that day was a mix of grace and works, it was not just pure works. And we see a radical difference between the truth that Paul preached and the Semi-Pelagian, synergistic, covenantal nomism of the day. So if we look at some of the teachings this is what we see:

Why did God elect Israel and give them the law? The various Rabbis taught that Israel was chosen because Israel was the only nation who would receive it when it was offered to all the nations of the world in the wilderness; or that God looked into the future and saw that they would be worthy of it; or that it was a mix of God seeking to glorify His name and the meritorious acts of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob earning the law as a reward (This sounds like the Catholic view of the treasury of the merits of the saints). So election for the 1st century Jews was conditioned upon Israel's obedience, it was not all of grace but part grace and part works. Paul will blow this out of the water in 9:11, '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.'

What is the state of man in sin? The Rabbis did not acknowledge that man has a sinful nature. They acknowledged that man can be tempted but they did not see man as dead in trespasses and sin and needing to be radically delivered by a miracle. This impacted how they viewed obedience. Perfect obedience to the law was not an impossibility because man was not totally depraved. Compare this to Paul's view of man's nature in Romans 8:7 where he tells us we will not submit to God's law because we are unable to do so as sinners. And the law as being impossible that all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

What is God's basis for judgement? There are various views amongst the Rabbis. Some spoke of three categories of people, the wicked, the righteous and those who were 50-50. Those who were 50-50 would go to Gehenna for a while, there they would scream and then they would be brought up and healed (sounds like Catholic purgatory). Other Rabbis believed that God enjoys rewarding good deeds more than punishing bad ones and so mercy triumphs over judgement. Others spoke about the overall intention of one's life, the

general direction of being obedient to God as being determinative in the judgement. What needs to be noted in all of these views is that my works are determinative not God's grace. God's grace does not come before but after to patch up any inadequacies in my obedience. Paul believes that we will only escape judgement if we have Christ's righteousness credited to us, it is only those who are in Christ by faith who will be justified.

How does one obtain forgiveness of sin? The rabbis taught four ways in which one could gain forgiveness. Firstly, by repentance, repentance done from love to God is good and repentance for fear of punishment was also acceptable. Secondly, by the various sacrifices especially the Day of Atonement. However, suffering and dying were also said to remove sin, in fact the guilt of most sins. Once again we see a mix of man and God, where Paul tells us that the only thing that can remove God's wrath towards our sins is the sacrifice, sufferings and death of Christ.

How does one become part of the covenant? Jews were automatically born into the covenant and had to opt out by apostasy. One kept oneself in the covenant by a general not perfect obedience, hoping for your good deeds to be considered rather than your bad, trusting that your suffering in death would remove the guilt of most sins and so finally be eternally saved, a type of purgatory was seen as possible for those who were 50-50.

There is a term used to describe Second Temple Judaism, covenantal nomism. This means to keep yourself in God's grace by works. God's grace is seen in nation of Israel into which one is born, and then you keep yourself in and forgiven by your own efforts and law keeping. This is a religious system which is synergistic, part man and part God, it is not all of grace, but only partially. Paul teaches that God elects us in grace not in consideration of our good deeds, that we are sinful and dead in sin unable to come to God unless God in grace intervenes and draws us to Himself. Paul sees God as providing the necessary sacrifice to remove the guilt of sin in Christ, and it is God who keeps us in His grace in sanctification by His Spirit continuing to work within us for holiness. And here we see in Romans 9:6 that every Jew is not automatically elected into the covenant to save themselves by works.

God's way of salvation

'But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.' You will notice as we look at 9:6 that it begins with the word 'but.' Paul begins this way because he has been waxing lyrical about all the privileges that the Jews had and have still not believed. He has assured us of the deep sorrow and anguish that he experiences because they do not believe. Paul's deep emotion is not an accusation, nor does it imply that God has somehow failed. Paul responds with a 'but' in order to clear up any possible misunderstanding on this count. The gentiles are enjoying all these benefits being children of Abraham through faith in Christ, but this does not mean that God has abandoned the Jews or resorted to some sort of plan B.

The 'word of God' that Paul mentions is most likely the word of promises of the OT that Paul has just mentioned in the list of v4-5. God made promises to provide a Saviour, to make a New Covenant and circumcise hearts. But there is nowhere in the OT where God promises that every child of Abraham will be saved. Paul makes this very clear in the second part of verse 6, 'For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.'

We can see that Paul is using the word 'Israel' in 2 different ways. The first designation is easy for us to understand because Paul adds the words 'not all who are descended from,' before it. Here Paul is alluding to the historical nation of Israel who originate from Jacob/Israel. The offspring of Jacob who are Jews by birth. So Paul is saying that not every true born Jew is part of 'Israel.' So what is meant by the second use of the word 'Israel.' Some have suggested that we should understand the second use of the word Israel as a representation of the NT church which is made up of saved Jews and non-Jews. This is not a bad suggestion because Paul does refer to the church as Israel in Galatians 6:16. He calls us children of Abraham in several places. Peter calls us a holy priesthood, we are called the saints of God, and many other descriptions indicate that the church is the Israel of God. However this is not what Paul means here. He is using the word to refer to those Jews who have been chosen by God for salvation in Christ. If you like you can distinguish between physical Israel and spiritual Israel, fleshly Israel and elect Israel. The point is this, Paul is revealing that the reason why all Jews did not and do not believe in Christ is because God has chosen that only part of the nation will become part of the church.

There are various references in the Bible to those who may outwardly be Jews but who are inwardly not born again, who are of Israel but not Israel. John the Baptist in Luke 3:8 says, 'Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.' In Romans 2:28-29 Paul talks about those who are circumcised in the flesh and those in heart, 'For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.' Paul calls those false Jewish teachers who were trying to teach the necessity of circumcision 'dogs' a term reserved for Gentiles in Philippians 3:2. And in Revelation 2:9 Jesus says of the unbelieving Jews who were persecuting the church, "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.'

So how then do we apply a verse like this, one that refutes the assumption that all Jews were automatically saved by appealing to God's distinguishing work in election. There are two things I would like us to take from this text. The first thing is this, are we assuming salvation because of the larger body of which we are a part, are we falling into the error of salvation by association? The first century Jews believed that by being born into Israel, they were in God's grace and all they had to do was some sincere good works that were within their ability, and not apostatize and they would be saved. One might think that such an obvious error would be avoided by Christians never to be repeated, but sadly this is not true. Lloyd-Jones uses four questions to show how we can still fall into this perspective

today. Firstly, is there any such thing as a Christian country? Are there such things as Christian nations and pagan nations? Sadly, this perspective continues to hold on but it was really big a few centuries ago. Anywhere where there has been a state church there has been the assumption that there is a Christian nation. If ever there was a nation that was God's it was Israel, and here Paul is telling that even in Israel not everyone was saved. In the NT the people of God as a mixed nation has been replaced with a church of people from all nations who are circumcised in heart. There is no possibility that there can be a nation that can be considered the people of God, the church is the people of God not any nation. This notion of Christian nations was created by the mixing of church and state and having a church that baptised babies, with these two things together you create the monster of state churches and a wide scale assumption that certain nations are God's people. This is an obstacle to the gospel and people seeing how they really stand before God. That we are born estranged from God not favoured by God because of the nation we are born in, that we are in need of the new birth that our first birth did not save us.

Are babies born to Christian parents of necessity Christians? Once again we have to answer no and stress that every child is born in Adam. They are not brought into union with the Second Adam Christ by their physical birth to Christian parents, they are only united to Christ by the Spirit through faith. A Christian is someone who is united to Christ and is therefore born again by the power of His life, justified by His righteousness, being sanctified by the presence of His Spirit, not someone born to Christian parents.

Are baptised babies Christians? This follows on from the first two points but the question is related not to one's parents but whether the act of baptising makes one a Christian. Those who practice baby baptism would say yes. For just as in the OT you could be an Israelite by being circumcised and part of the covenant community enjoying certain privileges, in the same way they say children of Christian parents receive baptism as the OT child received circumcision and is included in the covenant community in the same way in which an unregenerate child could be a member of the visible people of God in the OT. A Christian but not a Christian, a Christian visibly but not inwardly. My response is, the NT knows of no such distinction. The promise of the New Covenant includes the promise that every member of the covenant will be given a new heart and be filled with the Spirit. One of the differences between the OT and the NT, one of the improvements is that every person who is part of Christ, one of the members of His body is filled by the Spirit.

The fourth question is, is every member of the church who has confessed faith and been baptised a Christian? In other words, not just a baby being baptised but those who voluntarily identify with the church and have or are presently confessing Christ. It is possible for a person to be born in the church to Christian parents, to be raised in the church, confirmed in the church, to become a member of the church and to serve as an officer of the church, if you died in the church and we removed the pulpit and buried you under it, you could still not be a Christian and go to hell. In Israel we see that there were many who had all the trappings of their religion, who were regular in the festivals and temple attendance yet who did not believe. And just because we believe that only those who trust in Christ for salvation should be baptised and become members of the church, as human

beings we could err and baptise those who have not trusted in Christ, who are not born again, and not saved. It is not the church that saves, or the baptism, or the keeping yourself in this place of safety from the world that saves. We are saved when we trust in Christ and what He has done in our place to make us holy. And when we do God gives us a gift, it is a new criminal record with all of Jesus good deeds and His death and they are put in our name and seen as ours. This secures for us a new legal standing before God, not some church ceremony. It is the sovereign working of the Spirit that gives us a new heart and causes us to take Christ in faith and repent of our sins, it is not an automatic effect of being born to the right person or being in the right place.

So today, if we see those who come from a so called Christian country acting in an unchristian way, or if we see those born to Christian parents growing up and denying their faith, if we see those who have been baptised as babies joining other religions, or even those who have confessed Christ and been baptised and become members in the church abandon Christ. If we see all of this it does not mean that every single person whom God has chosen for salvation will not end up in heaven. There is not one of His true sheep that can be snatched out of His hands. All of these that fall away they were never saved, and prove it by the fruit they bear. God's purposes have not failed, rather we have wrongly defined the people of God. This is the solution that Paul is applying in Romans 9:6.

The other point I would like to make is this one, salvation is of God and not of man. We see in the first century Judaism a monument of man's attempt save himself and trusting in his own goodness and ability. They believed that they were given the law because Abraham had been good enough to earn it for them and that it was not all grace; they believed that they were given the law because God learnt by looking into the future that they would be the only ones who would be good enough and keep it, they believed that the doing of the law was within their grasp, they believed that their actions of suffering could remove the guilt of sin, they believed that by their ongoing obedience to the law to a relaxed standard that they could finish what God started. Certainly they tipped their hat to God and spoke about God's grace in giving the law, and forgiving sin, and rewarding beyond what we render. They were not pure Pelagians, no, but they did believe that salvation was assumed or manufactured by themselves. Here we see Paul pulling that rug out from beneath their feet. God is the one who saves not us, apart from God we cannot be saved. We are so totally dead in sin, so sinful, so incapable of keeping the law and so deserving of hell, that unless God is gracious, unless He takes the initiative, unless He provides a saviour and works by His Spirit we can never be saved. There is no salvation factory in any institution or ourselves, salvation is all of God from beginning to end.

Friends we will see that as we continue we will be blasting many Christians today who have the same wrong view of our ability and part in salvation. There are those today who believe that bushmen who have no evangelists can with their own minds and wills reason themselves to God. Or that any person who hears the gospel has a natural ability to love God and hate sin. Or that once we get saved, God has got us in but that we now need to keep ourselves in. No, salvation is all of God, from beginning to end.

No doubt this will raise some difficult questions about how many God saves and His willingness to save, and let me tell you now that you will not get all the answers you desire but what we will see and what will be established before our eyes without any doubt is that it is God who saves in toto and not in part, and it is He who will get all the glory for our salvation not just a part.