

Sermon 99: Romans 9:7-13: The Reality of Election

OUTLINE

The examples of election
The objections to election
The necessity of election

INTRODUCTION

I want to introduce this sermon with a word of personal testimony because the things we are about to observe in the text are difficult, not only to understand but to accept. As a young Christian I was fervently committed to daily evangelism. I saw all things through the lens of evangelism. I became a pragmatist that used things to further evangelism. When it came to particular teachings like women in the ministry I used to believe that the more evangelists we have the better, and would try and shame those who did not agree with the accusation that they did not love souls because they were willing to hinder the word going out. You can imagine my response then to the teaching on God's sovereign election. It was not explained to me logically by someone laying a foundation of man's sinfulness followed by a carefully explained exposition on the role of the Spirit in salvation. I brought the intellectual baggage of my unconverted days with me, I assumed free will, and could not even see the necessity for God's effective calling to be at work. The only thing I heard was that God chooses some to be saved and not others. If ever there was a teaching that I hated it was this one. I used to believe that John Calvin originated this teaching, but of course he did not; and that he was burning in hell for teaching this satanic doctrine of election. I spoke out against it at every opportunity and found in Charles Finney someone who agreed with me and backed up what I already believed. I thought I had it all worked out, I saw things simply, God loves everyone and wants everyone to be saved therefore everyone should be involved in evangelism and everything should serve the purpose of evangelism. The teaching of election was a hindrance to this that I thought would lead to coldness towards evangelism and laziness, as well as being a teaching that obscured the God of love. Well I stand before you today a firm believer in the biblical doctrine of God's sovereign election, and everything I thought I knew about election was a caricature and wrong, and so I ask you to bear with me, to travel with me through the texts that clearly teach the difficult teachings of God's election. These teachings have been described as meat and not milk, this does not mean we should avoid them but rather that we spend more time chewing on them and applying ourselves more diligently. Even young babies can eat solid food and every Christian will benefit immensely from understanding what God's word has to say.

Today we will be looking at Romans 9:7-13. You will remember that Paul has been speaking about the problem of the unbelief of the Jews. God has made various promises which appear to be unfulfilled. God looks weak or to be a liar because they have failed to believe. Paul is defending the glory of God by teaching that God never promised to save all; that He has within Israel a remnant who He will save. In Romans 9:6 he stated this truth, in

these verses we are looking at he is illustrating the truth of God's election from history. In particular he is using the Patriarchs whom the Jews held in very high esteem, seeing their lives as paradigmatic in many ways.

There are three things we will take from these verses, firstly, the examples God's election seeing that God has and does indeed elect, that is choose some and pass over others for salvation and blessing. Secondly, we want to then look at some of the alternate ways in which these texts have been interpreted and answer them establishing the truth of God's election. Finally we will then answer a part of the why question, why does God elect, why is election necessary?

The examples of election

Paul launches from his statement in v6 that not every Israelite is part of spiritual Israel with a follow up in verse 7, 'and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." Just as in verse 6 Paul used the word Israel with two meanings in this verse he uses the word 'offspring/seed' with two different meanings.' V8 is Paul's elaboration on what he means, '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.' If we had to make two columns representing those who are elect and those who are not from 7-13 we would have:

Israel-Israel;
offspring-offspring;
child of Abraham-child of Abraham;
Child of God-child of flesh;
child of promise-child of Abraham;
Isaac-Ishmael;
Sarah-Hagar;
Jacob-Esau;
loved-hated.
And from verses 14-18 we could add:
Moses-Pharaoh;
Mercy-hardening.
And from verses 19-23:
Vessels of mercy-vessels of wrath.

Paul is using these distinctions to show that God's promise does in fact get fulfilled, every time. Notice the words, 'child of promise' indicating the fulfilled and promise and again in v9, 'For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son." With the passing over of Ishmael for Isaac God's promise is still fulfilled. However, Paul is pointing out the mode of fulfilment, the promise is fulfilled to one of Abraham's sons not all, but the promise is still fulfilled.

Now as soon as we get into the stories of these people a number of excuses are anticipated by Paul. Paul is anticipating that the Jew in his audience would have a ready explanation

for why Isaac and not Ishmael was chosen and the other passed over. Hagar was an Egyptian and not Abraham's original wife and Ishmael was born of a lack of faith. We also see that Ishmael mocked Isaac probably by Hagar's influence so that Sarah wanted to banish them (Genesis 21:8-10). So Paul brings in his next set of examples in order to show that God's election is not based on our works or race but on His sovereign grace.

In verse 10 Paul moves on to Jacob and Esau, 'And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac.' Here we see one woman, not two, bearing sons by one man. Also the boys were twins having the same birthday. This closes the door on any thoughts about Hagar being Egyptian and the other racial explanations that others might suggest. But there is still the objection related to works. Paul then moves to close the door on the objection raised on the basis of works, v11, '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--'. Here we see that God's choice is not based on their works but came before their works. In other words if we go back to Abraham and ask, why did God save him, some Jews would say it was because he was a good man, but he wasn't. God saved them out of idolatry when they were bad not because they were good, when they were serving other gods not when they were serving Him, Joshua 24:2, 'And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.' Why did God choose Isaac and not Ishmael, was it because of his mother, because he mocked Isaac? No Paul is telling us that God did not choose on the basis of race or works but in accordance with His own will. Why did God choose Jacob and not Esau, it could not have been on the basis of race, was Jacob a better person than Esau? No we see that Jacob swindled his brother from his birth rite and blessing and deceived his dying father. Paul explicitly tells us that God did not elect on the basis of anything in Jacob, but by His own determination. The reason for the choosing of Jacob and not Esau lies in God and not man. God's purpose of election was not started on the basis of race or works and it is not progressed on that basis either. This all goes to prove that the faithfulness of God to His promise to Israel is coming to pass in His saving of some on the basis of grace not works or race.

Paul further emphasizes the independent nature of God's sovereign election by showing that the normal rights of the firstborn were not involved in the decision either, another affirmation that God was not persuaded to save on the basis of what he saw in them, v12, 'she was told, "The older will serve the younger."' Paul then quotes Malachi 1:2-3 as further proof of God's distinguishing love between Jacob and Esau.

All of this to prove that God saves some and not all, that He is faithful to His intentions and is not weak or a liar. All of this reinforces the basis upon which God saves. He does not save all Jews because race is not what influenced His decisions, nor does He save the deserving, no doubt the position that the law-keeping Jews would see themselves in. Grace not race or works, this is Paul's contention and the outcome of his argument.

The objections to election

Now of course the exegesis we have set out supports what is popularly known as Calvinism, though Calvin was not the originator of this teaching we can see that Paul is; Calvin merely set it out in a systematic fashion. This does not sit well with many and so there are various ways in which they have tried to reread the text to make it not say what we have just seen. The most popular attempt these days is to try and make Paul talk about nations and not individuals. You see if we can make the texts we have just looked at refer to God's favour to various groups, national blessing and not Paul answering the question of salvation then we can no longer use these verses to teach individual election. This might appear strong at first but is soon shown to be incorrect.

Firstly, although Paul uses various verses which speak of nations like Israel in 9:6 and a reference to Mal. 1:2-3 which in its original context is speaking of the nations of Israel and Edom. In the context Paul is speaking about various individuals within one nation not one nation being differentiated from another. It must not be forgotten that the names Jacob and Esau can represent nations is because they were originally the individuals from whom those nations came.

Secondly, the context is not how God blessed the nation of Israel in distinction from other nations, the context is how God is saving some of Israel and not all. The emphasis is on distinguishing within the nation of Israel not between the nation of Israel and others. This brings it down to the level of individuals not national groups.

Thirdly, Paul uses various words which relate to individual salvation and not merely to national blessing. The word 'calls' in v11 is the word Paul uses to describe God saving call in the gospel by which He unites sinners to Christ and which results in justification and finally glorification (Rom. 8:30). See especially Rom. 8:29.

The word 'election' in v11 is used by Paul in chapter 11:5, 7 to speak about salvation, it is the word 'chosen' in v5, and 'elect' v7. This word is used by Paul in its various forms in Eph. 1:4, 'even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.' 1 Cor. 1:27-29, 'But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.' Other verses include Rom. 8:33, Col. 3:16, 1 Tim 5:21, 2 Tim 2:10; Tit. 1:1, etc. In all of these verses the issue is individual salvation not national blessing/election.

The other main objection comes from those who acknowledge that the idea of election is linked with what Paul has been saying in chapter 8 where God is said to predestine according to foreknowledge. These are those who acknowledge that Paul is speaking about His eternal plan of salvation. On account of the fact that God's election to salvation apart from works sounds arbitrary they attempt to find a clever way to ground God's decision in something that we do. Firstly, there are those who uphold salvation by works by distinguishing one form of works from another. Some of the church fathers said that God did not save us based on our works pre-salvation but rather on the basis of our works post-salvation. This makes God election depend upon our works as a Christian and is refuted by

Paul. The Jewish Philosopher Philo suggested that God looked upon the baby works of Jacob and Esau and made His election on this basis. Paul flatly denies this. Some have suggested that Paul was referring to works of the law not works wrought by the Spirit. That God does elect on the basis of foreseen works just not works of the law of Moses. We must remember that the Mosaic law did not exist then.

Others try and root God's election not in our works but in our faith, Pelagius who did not believe in a sinful nature nor the need for inward grace in salvation, but who believed that we could convert ourselves and keep ourselves until heaven taught another view. He tried to argue that Paul says election is not based on works, but he doesn't say faith. Faith is in opposition to works, and God can ground his election is something opposed to works, namely faith. God looked into the future and saw who would believe and these were elected. This view was also taught by Jacob Arminius. So we ask the question, can we squeeze faith into Paul's words here and get out from under the teaching of election this way. Firstly, we must say that to establish a teaching by what the bible doesn't say is poor hermeneutics. Secondly and most importantly, Paul is highlighting that the cause of our election to salvation is not found within ourselves but in God. So whether we refer to foreseen works or faith becomes irrelevant because both are found in us as the determining factor for our election and not in God and His will which is the point Paul is trying to make. Thirdly, the context denies anything in us as being the defining factor look at v16, 'So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.'

You can try and be as clever as you want, if your election is determined by anything in you, be it race, goodness, foreseen works or faith, good intentions or sincerity, etc., if this is what we are saying determined God's choice to save us we are attributing our election to ourselves. Not only that we are flatly denying the point of Paul's whole argument, God is the one who determines who will be saved not us.

How do we react to this? How do we react to the notion that God not us decides our salvation; and that God does not decide to save us because of any good in us either foreseen or real, in the will or our actions? Perhaps you think that this sounds unjust. If this is what you are thinking then you have understood Paul exactly. You see Paul states his case in such a way that it would provoke just such a response, we see this in v14 where he anticipates just such a reaction. This further helps us to see that we have understood the text correctly so far. If you feel Paul is going down some dangerous path nearly making God look unjust, then you have understood him correctly.

The necessity of election

If you are anything like I was there may be some of you that are either angry or indifferent, angry because these doctrine are so confusing and divisive and no good can come of looking into them; or indifferent because you have made up your mind that this is just high browed theology and unimportant in the big scheme of things. But let me impress upon us all the utter importance of these things. This truth is not merely a mental abstraction at best and a vile error at worst. No, this truth of election is important for every one of us, it is

important for our worship as it informs us of who God is and that we get none of the glory for saving ourselves because He is our saviour from eternity past till eternity future; it is important for our assurance as it points out how effectively God saves; and it is important for our evangelism because it gives us the confidence to know that God will save His people. To not believe this doctrine of God's sovereign election will impoverish your worship, assurance and evangelism.

This doctrine teaches us about who God is, that He is not looking to us for His cues, dying to satisfy us and pander to every whim. His universe does not revolve around us and our wills but Him and His will. He is a God who is free in His determination needing nothing and was not put in our debt in any way that He had to save us or owed us salvation. He is the Lord who is seated on the throne of the universe deciding the end from the beginning and there is nothing and no one that can stay His hand or upset His plan. He is bringing all things to pass according to His will as He planned it from before the foundation of the earth.

This doctrine teaches you about who you are. You are a sinner born broken and guilty in Adam. You are not a basically good creature who needs a little guidance and who believe in Jesus if you just get a chance to hear the gospel. No, you are an enemy of God who does not want Him or His law. The gospel is foolishness to you and you are unable from your own resources to take Christ as saviour. You are so enslaved to your sin that you willingly choose sin and willingly reject God, you have a will but it is not free it is rooted in a sinful heart that will not choose for God and against self and sin. It is impossible for you to keep God's law and be perfect as He is perfect because when you try you fail almost immediately. It is impossible for you to offer anything to God done by you that can pay for your sin-debt and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. It is impossible for you to love Jesus when He is offered to you in the gospel and hate sin which you have served all your life apart from the working of the Spirit in your heart. But God who not only elects from eternity past, He exercises His power by calling us to Himself, for no one can come to Jesus unless he is drawn by the Father. This God frees our hearts from the effects of sin and enables to believe and repent. This God knowing our weakness fills us with His Spirit and by His Spirit sheds abroad the resurrection power of Christ in our lives to mortify sin. This God keeps you and finishes what He started and one day will glorify you with Christ and reward you with eternal riches. You did not seek Him first He sought you; you did not choose Him first He chose you; it was all in accordance with a plan of election from eternity past.

Imagine for a moment if your election depended upon you in any way. Imagine election depended on your sinful heart choosing Jesus instead of sin; or some good and perfect deed; or some so called foreseen faith. No one seeks God no not one, this includes you. God is the saviour of men, God calls people to Himself, we do not save ourselves.

This doctrine teaches me to see that salvation is wrought by God from beginning to end. He has chosen; He has called; He has enabled faith and repentance, my inevitable response was from a new heart He gave to me; He keeps me for heaven and heaven for me; He will resurrect me with Christ when He returns; He produces the fruit of the Spirit in me as I

cooperate with His Spirit within. Soli Deo Gloria! I cannot imagine any ability to be sure of my salvation if it depended on me in anyway.

This doctrine teaches me that God is a God of gracious and infinite love. He does not love me because He cant help Himself; He doesn't love me because there is something lovely in me that makes Him save me. He loves the unlovely, His love is free and not compelled, and it is only in the teaching of sovereign election that God's free love can be truly seen. God loves His enemies and those who deserve the opposite not those who have foreseen faith or some other thing that makes Him choose them.

This doctrine teaches me that when I go to preach there will be those who do not believe, but that there will be those who because God has purposed to save them, they will be saved. He will draw them because He has elected them. He uses the means of evangelism and I can confidently preach to the hardest sinners knowing that God by His power converts sinners and it is not by my power but His.

Next week we will see how Paul responds to the questions this truth raises.