

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ELECTION (PART I)

The doctrine of election has been one of the most controversial and, in the minds of many, the most disturbing doctrine in the Bible. It cannot be denied that the Bible teaches election – it plainly does – what often becomes heated in the way the doctrine is to be understood. Armenianism attempts to soften the doctrine by appealing to God's foreknowledge as the basis for Him choosing people unto salvation because He *foresees* that they will believe. In which case God actually does *elect* anyone! The doctrine of election is a very important measuring stick to see if we appreciate what the Bible means by *GRACE* and the various doctrines that are involved in understanding salvation. For instance, do we really grasp the full import of what the Bible tells us about human sinfulness and the holiness of God? The view that seems to dominate in most of our Evangelical churches is the Armenian one which says that the grace and mercy of God in salvation is activated by the autonomous will of the creature. In this scheme God simply makes a generous provision of salvation and leaves it up to fallen sinners to decide if they want it. I contend that if we adopt this outlook, we will fail to appreciate God's grace in sovereign election. In addition to this, an Armenian understanding of salvation will drastically affect how we present the gospel. An Armenian gospel basically preaches a God who, at best, is very passive. 'If the sinner only accepts the salvation that is offered to him, if only he will say, "I accept Christ as my personal Savior," all will be well with him, and grace can proceed; but if he is recalcitrant and stubbornly declines the earnest invitation to be saved, grace can do nothing with him. Many a preacher does not hesitate openly and boldly to declare that God is powerless to save the sinner unless the latter gives his consent, and that Christ can do no more than He did unless the sinner permits Him to proceed with His work of salvation. Jesus is willing to save, but His willingness must suffer shipwreck on the rock of man's contrary and refractory will. He stands at the door of the sinner's heart and knocks; but the key of the door is on the inside, and the Savior cannot enter, unless the sinner opens the door.'¹ John Calvin rightly declared that we shall never be persuaded of God's mercy until we know His eternal election, and "that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but GIVES TO SOME WHAT HE DENIES TO OTHERS."² He goes on to say that those who "shut the gates" to the teaching "wrong men no less than God," for it is election in grace that makes us humble and glorifies God. The way in which this subject is raised by the Apostle stems from the commonly heard objections from Paul's fellow Jews, "If what you are proclaiming is true, what about the covenantal promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Have the promises failed?" There is a lot riding on Paul's response. It seems either that Paul's gospel is true and the promises nullified, or Paul's gospel is false and the promises are true. In the latter case, then, Jesus Christ is not the Messiah of the nation of Israel and, in view of the fact that that is what He claimed to be, He is an imposter. As Piper points out, "What is at stake *ultimately* in these chapters is not the fate of Israel; that is penultimate. Ultimately *God's* own trustworthiness is at stake. And if God's word of promise cannot be trusted to stand forever, than all our faith is in vain."³ In the course of Paul's answer, the doctrine of divine election comes before us in all its magnificent goodness. "It teaches us," says S. Lewis Johnson, "divine mercy and grace, for He chooses us for no other reason than His good pleasure. And it teaches us a proper humility, for there is absolutely nothing in us that is responsible for His choice of us."⁴

I. DISTINGUISHING GRACE AND GOD'S ELECTING PURPOSE

- A. The Word of God and the purpose (Rom. 9:6-8). The apostle will make it clear that Israel's basic failure is a failure to understand Scripture. If they had, they would have realized that even in Old Covenant days the principle of distinguishing grace was at work. The Word of God did not fail and will not fail. It was never the intent of God that every Israelite be saved. There was a rejection of portions

of the elect race in ancient times. The analogy of biblical history indicates that the promises were given to the chosen, not the natural seed alone. "Israel," Barrett points out, "is not a term like Ammon, Moab, Greece, or Rome."⁵

"Not as though the word of God hath taken no effect," (9:6). The word translated, "hath taken no effect," means *to fall out of*, or *to fall from* literally. It is used of the withering of flowers in James 1:11 and I Peter 1:24 and of the falling off from a straight course by navigators in Acts 27:17, 26, 29. It is as if Paul is saying: The Word of God has not fallen off its straight course, the purpose of God. The trouble is with the passengers, who have disembarked at the port of scriptural ignorance and unbelief.

The statement, "For they are not all Israel, who are of Israel," has nothing to do with Gentiles, although some have tried to make it include them. What it says, and says very plainly and simply, is that there are two kinds of Israelites. Just because one is ethnically an Israelite does not mean that he is an Israelite in the truest sense, for the term is a religious one. To be a true Israelite, one must be a believer, or one must walk in the believing steps of father Abraham (cf. 4:12). It is to the believing seed of Abraham that the promises are given.

- B. **The seed of Abraham and the purpose** (Rom. 9:7). In fact, Paul continues, simply because one is a descendant of Abraham does not mean that he is a child of the patriarch. It is "in Isaac" that the seed is called, which means that those who are only ethnically the descendants of the patriarch are not the recipients of the blessings from the promises. Ishmael, too, was Abraham's son, but Isaac by distinguishing grace is the one who inherits the promises. Cf. Gen. 21:12.
- C. **The underlying principle** (Tom. 9:8). Paul concludes by saying that the children of the promises are counted as the seed. In other words, back of the belief there lies a divine sovereign promise and calling (cf. Luke 19:9).

II HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF DISTINGUISHING GRACE

- A. **Ishmael and Isaac** (Rom. 9:7-9). One easily sees that the apostle did not fabricate his theology in a rationalistic way. He did not reason out his theological stand and then search the Scriptures for passages on which to pin his ideas. What he has done is simply to exegete the Scriptures, constructing his views from what he has found by reading and interpreting the texts under the Spirit's guidance. If one reads Genesis and ponders the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in connection with the divine covenantal promises, he will come to the same theology that Paul came to. And he will find that it strangely resembles that form of teaching popularly known as Calvinism, although the latter term, according to Charles Spurgeon, is simply a term that refers to the gospel, as I pointed out last week.

The word *promise* in 9:9 is emphatic in the original text. Paul lays stress on it, for it is a word of grace. When men are blessed by divine promise, they are blessed in grace, for the promise, unconditioned, is something given.

The illustration of Ishmael and Isaac has been alluded to in verse seven. In the citation from Genesis 18:10, in verse nine it is referred to again. The words of the Lord God to Abraham constitute a gracious promise of the birth of Isaac to Sarah. Ishmael is not to be the promised seed, although he is Abraham's first born. The son of the handmaid, born according to the flesh, shall not inherit with the son of the free, as Paul puts it in Galatians four. Here is the principle of distinguishing grace, for the election of Isaac was not on the basis of works of any kind.

An objector might say, however, "But Ishmael was not the son of Sarah. He has a complex parentage, and his mother was an Egyptian." Thus, we should be back to the principle of election according to works, or ethnic origin. The apostle replies by citing another passage from the Word.

- B. **Esau and Jacob** (Rom. 9:10-12). Here the law of limitations is contracted further. There is no problem of complex parentage here, for Rebecca was the mother of twins by one man (in the original text the emphasis rests upon the fact that the two sons came from one man). And yet the destiny of the two was to be infinitely different, for Jacob is loved, but Esau is hated (the meaning of this will be explained below).

The story upon which the apostle builds his teaching is found in Genesis 25:19-26, where the birth of the twins is recorded. God had promised Isaac that he should have a seed, but Rebecca was barren (cf. v. 21). So the patriarch entreated the Lord for his wife, illustrating quite aptly that

divine predestination is not contrary to earnest supplication. In fact, prayer is one of the divinely appointed means for the accomplishment of the purpose of God.

Ishmael has been prospering, twelve princes having been born to him, but Isaac, the one from whom the seed is to come, has no children. The patriarch is being taught patience, and that God accomplishes the fulfillment of His promises in His own way, not in ours.

The prayer was answered, and Rebecca was pregnant with twins. As they struggled within her womb, she, troubled by the meaning of it all, went to ask the Lord about it. She received this word, and a prophetic word it was, "Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be born of thee; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and THE ELDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER" (Gen. 25:23). History makes it plain that the prophecy is one that covers the history of the descendants of Jacob and Esau but, as the final clause makes clear, it also refers specifically to the destiny of the two individuals, Jacob and Esau. Contrary to ancient Eastern custom, the elder son shall serve the younger.

CONCLUSION: The important words for Paul in Romans nine are the last ones of prophecy, "the elder shall serve the younger" (cf. v. 12). It is from them that Paul reasons to his conclusions. The blessing of the unborn Jacob and the preferring of him to Esau, before they had had an opportunity to do anything good or evil, teaches in Paul's mind the doctrine of sovereign distinguishing grace in election. He points out that the children were not yet born when the choice was made. Further, they had not done any works. Thus, the election of Jacob was according to the divine purpose, and it was not based upon works but upon the will of the One calling, that is, God. Further, the choice involved individuals, not simply nations.

We may sum it up by saying that, first, the sovereignty of the divine choice is taught in the choice of Jacob (v. 11). And, second, the particularity of the choice is taught in the preferring of Jacob to Esau (vv. 12-13).

This pre-natal love of God for Jacob raises, of course, the doctrine of election and the basis upon which God makes His selection. There are, it seems, only three alternatives. In the first place, it might be contended that God chooses on the basis of the moral qualities of the individual. In other words, He chooses the good. But all of the Bible argues against this, thoroughly refuting the notion that human status is the basis of salvation. Ephesians 2:8-10 thoroughly overthrows the idea, and there are countless texts that say the same things.

I close with this insight comment from Spurgeon, "Men say they do not like the doctrine of election. Verily, I do not want them to; but is it not a fact that God has elected some? Ask an Armenian brother about election, and at once his eye turns fiercely upon you, and he begins to get angry, he can't bear it; it is a horrible thing, like a war-cry to him, and he begins to sharpen the knife of controversy at once. But say to him, 'Ah, brother! Was it not divine grace that made you to differ? Was it not the Lord who called you out of; your natural state, and made you what you are?' 'Oh, yes,' he says, 'I quite agree with you there.' Now, put this question to him: 'What do you think is the reason why one man has been converted, and not another?' 'Oh,' he says, 'the Spirit of God has been at work in this man.' Well, then, my brother, the fact is, that God *does* treat one man better than another; and is there anything wonderful in this fact? It is a fact we recognize every day. There is a man up in the gallery there, that work as hard as he likes, he cannot earn more than fifteen shillings a week; and here is another man that gets a thousand a year; what is the reason of this? One is born in the palaces of kings, while another draws his first breath in a roofless hovel. What is the reason of this? God's providence. He puts one man in one position, and another man in another. Here is a man whose head cannot hold two thoughts together, do what you will with him; here is another who can sit down and write a book, and dive into the deepest of questions; what is the reason of it? God has done it. Do you not see the fact, that God does not treat every man alike? He has made some eagles, and some worms; some he has made lions, and some creeping lizards; he has made some men kings, and some are born beggars. Some are born with gigantic minds and some verge on the idiot. Why is this? Do you murmur at God for it? No, you say it is a fact, and there is no good in murmuring. What is the use of kicking against facts? It is only kicking against the pricks with naked feet, and you hurt yourself and not them. Well, then, election is a positive fact; it is as clear as daylight, that God does, in matters of religion, give to one man more than to another. He gives to me opportunities of hearing the word, which he does not give to the Hottentot. He gives to me, parents who, from infancy, trained me in the fear of the Lord. He does not give that to many of you. He places me afterwards in situations where I am restrained from sin. Other men are cast into places where their sinful passions are developed. He gives, to one man a temper and disposition which keeps him back from some lust, and to another man he gives such impetuosity of spirit, and depravity turns that impetuosity so much aside, that the man runs headlong into sin. Again, he brings one man under the sound of a powerful

ministry, while another sits and listens to a preacher whose drowsiness is only exceeded by that of his hearers. And even when they are hearing the gospel, the fact is God works in one heart when he does not in another. Though, I believe to a degree, the Spirit works in the hearts of all who hear the Word, so that they are all without excuse, yet I am sure he works in some so powerfully, that they can no longer resist him, but are constrained by his grace to cast themselves at his feet, and confess him Lord of all; while others resist the grace that comes into their hearts; and it does not act with the same irresistible force that it does in the other case, and they perish in their sins, deservedly and justly condemned. Are not these things facts? Does any man deny them? *Can* any man deny them? What is the use of kicking against facts? I always like to know when there is a discussion, what is the fact. You have heard the story of King Charles the Second and the philosophers—King Charles asked one of them, ‘What is the reason why, if you had a pail of water, and weighed it, and then put a fish into it, that the weight would be the same?’ They gave a great many elaborate reasons for this. At last one of them said, ‘Is it the fact?’

And then they found out that the water did weigh more, just as much more as the fish put into it. So all their learned arguments fell to the ground. So, when we are talking about election, the best thing is to say, ‘Put aside the doctrine for a moment, let us see what is the fact?’ We walk abroad; we open our eyes; we see, there is the fact. What, then, is the use of our discussing any longer? We had better believe it, since it is an undeniable truth. You may alter an opinion, but you cannot alter a fact. You may change a mere doctrine, but you cannot possibly change a thing which actually exists. There it is—God does certainly deal with some men better than he does with others. I will not offer an apology for God; he can explain his own dealings; he needs no defense from me,

‘God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain;’

but there stands the fact. Before you begin to argue upon the doctrine, just recollect, that whatever you may think about it, you cannot alter it; and however much you may object to it, it is actually true that God did love Jacob, and did not love Esau.”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ H. Hoeksema, The Wonder of Grace (Reformed Free, 1982) p. 12.

² Calvin, Institutes of The Christian Religion (Bk. 3. Ch. 21. sec. 1).

³ J. Piper, The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23 (Baker, 1983) p. 5.

⁴ As I have indicated throughout this series, I am deeply indebted to my professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the late S. Lewis Johnson and his lectures on Romans. This outline and the substance of the notes are derived from him.

⁵ C. K. Barrett, A Commentary on The Epistle to The Romans (Harper 1987) p. 180.

⁶ The New Park Street Pulpit: Sermon No. 241. Delivered on Sabbath Morning, Jan. 16, 1859.