

BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS #9

Scripture of Lesson: Romans 9: 1~33

In Chapter 9 Paul is trying to awaken the Jewish readers to the fact that their heritage of God's chosen people is very valuable and yet the promise of God's covenant is through faith in Christ, therefore, comes as God chooses to grant to those to whom He will. The children of promise have been carried down through the generations because God, through His foreknowledge, pre-determined who will be chosen as His elect. This concept of pre-determination is unique with Paul and is often difficult to understand and to accept. Let us explore the meaning behind Paul's writing so as not to be confused or to misunderstand Paul's intent.

1. God's covenants with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: v. 1~13

In the first part of Chapter 9 Paul exposes the painful feeling he has towards the fellow Hebrew people in that they are his fellow people by blood. He points out the heritage that God has bestowed on the Israelites is very valuable. [v. 2, 3] They have not only the Scripture but all prophets, election as God's people, glorious witnessing of God's miracles and power through their past historical journeys as directed by God, the Mosaic laws including the Ten Commandments given through Moses, the privilege of worshiping God (in the temple, as communities and in private lives), and the covenant that He had given to Abraham and is carried down to them through the generations as being children of Abraham. [v. 4] All faithful predecessors of faith with their examples are before them as a spiritual heritage. Moreover, Christ the Messiah came out of their stock as prophesied by the prophets. [v. 5] Thus, Paul recited each of the valuable blessings that are with the Israelites. But why would Paul's heart be grieved and pained? It is because they refuse to recognize and accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Apostle Paul left his hometown of Tarsus in today's southern Turkey, the fourth largest city in the country. His parents sent their son to be educated under Gamaliel, a renowned doctor of the Hebrew law and leader in the Sanhedrin of the land, in Jerusalem. Unlike his teacher, who showed tolerance towards the disciples of Jesus,¹ Paul somehow came to harbor a strong enmity against them. Having been converted, however, during one of his trips to persecute the Christians, Paul must be reviewed his entire Pharisaic learning, particularly the subject of God's salvation plan as expressed through the OT Scripture. And He came to the conclusion that God elected His chosen people very selectively through His foreknowledge of the people's hearts and motives.

God's promise [covenant] was granted to each generation of believers starting from Abraham as a gift of grace, not to anyone, any child but through their faith in the covenant extended to them. When Abraham believed God and obeyed His command, simply believing that God would provide for him and his household and it was entirely worthwhile for him to leave his father's household and his homeland and start on a journey simply trusting in God's promise, God took that faith as something very precious and had joy in blessing Abraham. He even came to consider Abraham as His friend.

Abraham had two sons initially – Ishmael and Isaac later in life. Although Ishmael was the first born son, God made clear to Abraham that another son, who would be given under an impossible condition of their old

¹ Acts 5: 38~39

age, would be the son of promise. Abraham believed God and Isaac came along. Of course Abraham and Sarah loved Isaac, the son of God's promise who came late in their life as a result of their faith in God's promise. [v. 8~11] Then, God told him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Abraham obeyed because it was God's command. He believed God would give him another son if Isaac had to be killed as a sacrifice to God. On Mt. Moriah, however, God provided a ram to be offered and refrained Abraham from killing Isaac. Both Abraham and Isaac learned to know God's plan of sacrificing His own son for the salvation of all people. They came to know the heart of God in this grand plan of human salvation. Isaac lived to be a son of promise in the true sense. And God had the pleasure of blessing him.²

A similar pattern of God blessing and choosing the next generation son of promise occurred in the case of Esau and Jacob. God loved Jacob but hated Esau. [v. 13] Jacob had a cunning nature in him. But he loved God and trusted in His guidance and provision. So God caused Isaac to bless Jacob and not Esau.³ Jacob meets God on his journey towards his uncle's home and made a covenant with God.⁴ Thus, God worked through various people in each generation to accomplish His plan of electing a people for Himself.

Discussion topic: God referred to Himself many times as 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.' What is the significance of this self-identification that refers to the three generations of early believers? How is this related to the Jewish people today?

2. God chooses the elect not by works but by His grace: v. 14~29

Through these examples of their forefathers Paul makes it clear that it was God who chose sons of promise, not them. Likewise, it is not us who chose Jesus Christ as our Lord but God chose us. The gospel came to us because God saw something precious in us. God chose people in each generation because Holy Spirit went about looking for those who would fear God and believe God. Not all seashells contain pearls but only a few. Not all trees bear good fruits but selected trees. The subset of the Israeli people who were chosen by God, Paul called 'the elect.' [v. 8: 33]

This term, the elect, had been used by Isaiah and Jesus, and it refers to the select chosen people of God, not meaning the entire Hebrew people.

*They shall not build and another inhabit;
They shall not plant and another eat;
For as the days of a tree, so shall be the days of My people,
And My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. [Isaiah 65: 22]*

And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. [Matt 24: 31]

² Genesis 26: 12~14

³ Genesis 27

⁴ Genesis 28: 10~22

In fact, Jesus told the hypocritical Pharisees that God can raise a people of His own out of stones, so they must not pride in the fact they were descendants of Abraham.

Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. [Matt 3: 8~9]

Along this line of defining God's elect, Paul declares that the present body of Christians is the elect of God whom God predestined, called, made righteous through their faith in Jesus Christ and were now sanctifying so that He could take pleasure in showing "the riches of His glory" on these vessels of mercy. [v. 23] God has been choosing this elect not according to their works but by the grace of the One who elects. [v. 11] And this elect body of people are called 'the children of the living God,' [v.26] not because they are blood-line descendants of Abraham but are included in the covenant God established with Abraham through His grace on account of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Are you offended at this, that is, God choosing His elect people and leaving the rest of humanity outside of His promise? Are you mad at God for blessing those He chooses to bless and for casting out the rest of the world's people without hope of salvation? If you are, there are two counter arguments to your feelings or disposition.

First, God is the Almighty Creator of the universe. He has every right and prerogative to do whatever He chooses to do. And we are mere creation of His, we are what He made with His hands. So Paul counters by saying, "Does a creature say anything against its maker?" How can a pot protest to the potter, "Why did you make us so ugly?" [v. 19~20] We simply are not in a position to say much against God's plan. It would be far better to know what God's will is and try to fit into it.

Secondly, God's mercy and love are being extended to the entire humanity and creation even to this day! If the gospel of Christ has reached you, you do not have any excuse or ground for refusing it because that is the chief way of God extending His calling invitation to come and be at His side as a part of His elect.

Discussion topic: Does God's pre-election with foreknowledge apply only to the early Jewish generations of believers or does it apply to all generations leading to today? How does His election apply to us?

3. Israel's failure as God's elect: v. 30~33

Through his theological exposition on how the chosen people of God, the people of Israel, which is Paul's own people, had failed to attain to God's righteousness, his heart was aching, experiencing sadness. [v. 2] He must have asked himself many times, "How did this failure occur, how did my own people fail to understand God's salvation plan and disappointed His heart so much so that they crucified Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, and are still refusing His gospel?" His heart was aching. Sadness filled his heart. And he continued to meditate and came to this conclusion.

V. 32 summarizes the fundamental way how the people of Israel failed as God's chosen people: They sought salvation but by faith but as something they could attain by the works of the law. So they established

hundreds of do's and don'ts and imposed them to their people telling them they could have God's approval and enjoy the fruits of God's promise to them if and only if they faithfully comply with such rules. It was the concept of salvation by works. Paul states clearly this wrong concept of salvation was the stumbling stone whereon the people of Israel stumbled and fell.

*The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow;
Let Him be your fear,
And let Him be your dread.
He will be as a sanctuary,
But a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense
To both the houses of Israel,
As a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
And many among them shall stumble;
They shall fall and be broken,
Be snared and taken. [Isaiah 8: 13~15]*

Would you say that God is a tricky God who enjoys placing a stumbling stone in the path of His people and when they stumble over it, He says, "Aha, you stumbled and fell so you are dammed?" Is this the image of God you have in your heart? If you do, you are very much mistaken. God is very pleased when His elect goes through a life's journey, which are often strewn with rocks and thorns, by trusting in God's provisions and guidance, asking for wisdom to avoid the pitfalls that lie ahead in her daily journeys. God takes pleasure sometimes by intervening on behalf of His elect to remove critical hindrances along their pathways. But God never enjoys placing a pitfall before a child's path to make her fall into it and get hurt. God is not a cruel God as such. He is a kindhearted God with wonderful lovingkindness.

What the Jewish religious leaders did in misunderstanding God's salvation plan and teaching their people in their wrong doctrine was their own making. God had warned and tried to bring them from such wrong ways by sending His prophets over centuries. Yet they did not listen to them. Rather they chose to go just the opposite. Now when God sent His own Son to show them how to serve God in spirit and in truth, they killed Him on a cross on Calvary. The way that Jesus Christ became a huge stumbling block to the Jews in the first century was their own making—because of the hardness of their heart, their insistence on their wrong doctrine of salvation.

The Christian church over many centuries fell into the same trap of the wrong doctrine of salvation – salvation by works. Thus, the Church imposed on the believers that they could be saved only by doing good works for the church, the pope, the clergy or the poor. Good works follow after conversion but are voluntary expressions of Christians of their thankfulness and devotion to their faith. Good works must never be imposed on the believers as a requirement of their salvation. It is still a trap that a church can easily fall into and cause much misery and lack of happiness instead of joy and gladness of salvation.

Discussion topic: If God foreknew that the people of Israel would be mostly unfaithful to Him and turn away from Him, why did He choose Abraham and his descendants to be His people? What does this election imply regarding God's character?