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WHY GOD'S WORD CANNOT FAIL

Romans 9:6-13

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Romans, Lesson 58

Why God's Word Cannot Fail Romans 9:6-13

We come now to a section of Scripture that Dr. James Boice called "the most difficult portion of the entire Bible, more difficult even than those very confusing sections in Daniel, Revelation, and other books that deal with prophecy" (*Romans: God and History* [Baker], 3:1051). In my judgment, biblical prophecy is more difficult than Romans 9 to *understand*, but Romans 9 is more difficult to *accept* and *joyfully submit to*. And *joyfully* submitting to Romans 9 is the key to benefitting spiritually from the truth taught here.

Romans 9 is hard for many believers to submit to because it probably will change your view of who God is, and many want God to be someone other than whom the Bible reveals Him to be. They want God to be an equal-opportunity Savior, who loves everyone just the same. They want Him to be what they consider "fair," giving everyone an equal chance to be saved. And they want that salvation, at least in some small way, to be linked to something in us. They want to think, "God loves me because in spite of my faults, I'm really a loveable person." Or, "The reason I'm saved is because I chose God. The decision was up to me and I made the wise choice! My salvation in part is due to me."

But in Romans 9, Paul shows that God has not granted salvation equally to all people. He has always made choices, not only between nations, but also between individuals. He has not given everyone an equal chance to be saved. And, Paul states that when God saves someone, it has absolutely *nothing* to do with anything good in that person. Rather, it depends totally on God's purpose according to His choice (9:11). He adds (9:16), "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." And, to squash the idea that God has mercy equally on everyone, Paul adds (9:18), "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires."

That's not hard to understand, but you probably find it hard *joyfully to submit to*. Some of you may think, "I can accept that because it's in the Bible, but I don't *like* it!" So you submit to it like

you submit to eating broccoli, because you know that it's good for you. But you don't especially *like* it.

Why do I say that you need to submit *joyfully* to the truth of Romans 9? There are at least three reasons. First, this is God's revelation of who He is, and we should not only grudgingly accept who He is, but also rejoice in who He is. He is the only totally perfect and glorious Being in the universe. The more that we see Him in His glorious beauty, the more we should rejoice.

Second, we should rejoice in these truths about God because Jesus did. There is only one place in the gospels where it says that Jesus "rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit" (Luke 10:21). The truth that made Him rejoice greatly was that the Father, whom He calls "Lord of heaven and earth," had hidden the truth of knowing Him from the wise and had revealed it to babes. Jesus said that the only ones who can know the Father are those to whom the Son wills to reveal Him (see Luke 10:21-22). If that truth of the Father and the Son revealing themselves to some, but not to others, doesn't make you rejoice, then you aren't rejoicing in what Jesus rejoiced in.

Third, these truths should make you rejoice because Paul is using them to explain why your salvation is secure and certain. The problem that he is addressing in Romans 9-11 is: If God's promises to bless the Jews are certain, then why are most Jews rejecting Christ? Does their rejection of Jesus mean that God's promises can fail? And if His promises to Israel failed, then maybe the wonderful promise of Romans 8—that nothing can separate us from His love—could fail. So Paul is arguing why God's word cannot fail:

God's word cannot fail because He always accomplishes His purpose through His free choice of a remnant according to His grace.

Before we work through Paul's argument in our text, I want to show you from other Scriptures that for God's word of promise not to fail, He must be the all-powerful sovereign who *always* accomplishes His purpose. In other words, if you want God's promises to hold true, you must let God be God. That sounds reasonable on the surface, but there are many believers who fight against it. Maybe some of you will want to fight what I say today and in the next few messages. But my prayer is that, while the effect may not

take hold by the end of this sermon, hopefully as you wrestle to understand these deep truths, you will come out on the other side *rejoicing* in them!

1. God's word cannot fail because He is the only sovereign of the universe who always accomplishes His purpose.

For God to be able *always* to keep His promises, He must be *absolutely sovereign*. If He purposes something, but can't actually pull it off, then His purpose is uncertain. If Satan and the demons or some evil, powerful human, might mess up God's purpose, then He is not totally sovereign and you can't trust His purpose.

Or, to put it another way, if God has relinquished control over the course of history to the "free will" of man, then history may not turn out exactly as God planned. For God's promise to hold true that absolutely nothing can separate us from His love, God has to be able to carry out His sovereign purpose in spite of all attempts of Satan and wicked sinners to thwart it. God's sovereignty means that He is free to plan, to choose, and to carry out His plan, and no one is able to thwart that plan. Here are just a few Scriptures that teach this:

Job 23:13: "But He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does."

Job 42:2: "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted."

Psalms 22:28: "For the kingdom is the Lord's and He rules over the nations."

Psalms 33:10-11: "The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation."

Psalms 103:19: "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all."

Psalms 115:3: "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."

Daniel 4:34-35: "For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All

the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'"

Isaiah 46:9-10: "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" (See, also, Isa. 45:1-7.)

Eph. 1:10b-11: "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will."

These are just a few of dozens of verses that show that God is the absolute sovereign over His creation, including the angelic and human parts of creation. Satan is powerful, but he cannot thwart God's purpose for even a second, and in the end he will accomplish God's purpose and then be thrown into the lake of fire. Rebellious, powerful monarchs cannot thwart God's purpose by persecuting His church. In the end, they will only be pawns to accomplish His purpose and then face eternal judgment.

In light of these many verses, it's puzzling why many professing Christians argue that God has relinquished His sovereignty to the will of man. They picture God in heaven, wringing His hands, saying, "I've done everything that I can do to provide salvation, but now it's up to them to choose Me. Oh, how I wish that they would believe!" They're saying that God's purpose in sending His Son to the cross has been frustrated by human sin. But as A. W. Pink rightly stated (*The Sovereignty of God* [The Banner of Truth Trust], p. 21, italics his), "To declare that the Creator's original plan has been frustrated by sin, is to *dethrone* God."

The biblical truth that God is absolutely sovereign, which means that He always accomplishes His purpose, should cause you to rejoice, because it means that His promise concerning His love for you in Christ cannot fail. Let's trace Paul's argument in our text:

2. God's word of promise to the Jews cannot fail because He always accomplishes His purpose through His free choice of a remnant according to His grace.

Paul states the proposition in 9:6a: "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." Then he explains this by a principle: "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." This confronted the proud Jewish notion that all Jews would go to heaven by virtue of their physical birth as Jews. Then Paul proves the principle with two illustrations. First (9:7-9) he shows that not all of Abraham's descendants were his true children, but only those who were "children of the promise" through Isaac. Ishmael and his descendants were "children of the flesh" (9:8).

But Paul's Jewish critics might have said, "Granted, Ishmael was not a child of the promise because his mother was Hagar, the Egyptian maid." So, Paul gives a second illustration to prove his point (9:10-13): The descendants of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, were born of the same mother and father at the same time. But God chose Jacob and rejected Esau while they were still in the womb, before either of them had done good or bad. God's reason for doing this was (9:11), "so that His purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls." Paul backs up his point with two Old Testament references, "The older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23); and, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Mal. 1:2b-3a). He is proving that God's word to Israel has not failed, because God always accomplishes His purpose through His free choice of a remnant according to His grace.

Before I explain this phrase by phrase, I need to respond to two common attempts to dodge Paul's teaching here. First, some claim that in Romans 9 Paul is not dealing with God's choice of some for *salvation*, but rather for *service*. But, Paul's deep grief (9:1-5) was over the fact that most of his fellow Jews were *not saved*, not that they were not serving God. The terms that Paul uses in our text show that salvation is the issue (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], pp. 496-497). "Children of God" and "children of the promise" (9:8) invariably refer to salvation (Rom. 8:16, 21; Phil. 2:15; Gal. 4:28). "To call" (9:11) always refers to God's effectual call to salvation.

Another argument is that Paul is talking here about *nations*, not about *individuals*. Somehow, this is supposed to soften the "unpleasant" notion that God chooses individuals to salvation. But if God chose Israel as a nation, but did not choose any other nation

(Deut. 7:7-8; Ps. 147:19-20), then all the *individuals* in other nations were excluded from the covenant promises. While Malachi 1:2-3 in its context refers to the nations that came forth from Jacob and Esau, it went back to God's choice of Jacob and rejection of Esau *as individuals* while they were still in the womb. We might ask, if it's supposedly unfair of God to choose one individual and reject another, isn't it *more* unfair to choose one nation and reject all others?

But the problem that Paul is addressing here is, why are many individual Jews, who are a part of the elect nation of Israel, not saved? His answer is that God didn't choose everyone in Israel to be saved. He later (11:5) refers to the "true Israel" as "a remnant according to God's gracious choice." Consider four aspects of Paul's teaching:

- A. God always accomplishes His sovereign purpose through His choice of a remnant.

Paul's answer to the question of whether God's word has failed because most of the Jews were rejecting Christ is, "No, because God never promised to save the entire Jewish nation, but rather, only a remnant." That's what he means by (9:6), "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." He made the same point in 2:28-29 when he said that being a true Jew is not a matter of outward circumcision, but rather of an inward work of God's Spirit in the heart.

He says the same thing in slightly different language (9:7a), "Nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants." Ishmael and Isaac were both Abraham's *physical* children, but only Isaac was the child of God's promise. God's spiritual blessings were to come through the line of Isaac, not Ishmael.

Then Paul repeats it again to make sure we get it (9:8), "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." He is saying that while in a general sense God chose the entire nation of Israel, He never promised to save every Jew. Rather, some Jews were the children of the promise of salvation. As Paul explains (9:11), this was "so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls."

The Bible is clear that God has always accomplished His purpose by choosing some, which implies that He rejects others. An entire city, Ur of the Chaldees, was made up of pagan idolaters (Josh. 24:2), but God chose only one man out of that city, Abram, and promised to bless him. He specifically *excluded* Abram's family by telling Abram to leave them and go to the place that God would designate (Gen. 12:1). Then Abraham fathered Ishmael through Hagar and asked God to make him the heir. But God refused that request and told Abraham that Isaac would be the son of the promise (Gen. 17:18-21). In a similar fashion, God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. His purpose was never to save all the descendants of Abraham, but only a chosen remnant.

B. God accomplishes His sovereign purpose through His power, not through man's ability.

Ishmael was a child of the flesh in the sense that Abraham conceived him through Hagar through natural means. There was no miracle involved. But Isaac, the child of the promise, was conceived after Abraham and Sarah were past their natural ability to conceive children. His birth required God's miraculous power. "I will come" (9:9) focuses on God's powerful intervention. His miraculous power was the only explanation for Isaac's birth.

As such, Isaac is a picture of the spiritual miracle of the new birth, which is not humanly explicable (John 1:13; Gal. 4:21-31). Some are born in a Christian family and raised in the church. Perhaps they are baptized and confirmed in the church. But if God does not impart new life to them, they are not "children of the promise." They are not true children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). "You must be born again" (John 3:7).

C. God accomplishes His sovereign purpose through His free choice.

This is to say, God's purpose is not held hostage by whatever man decides to do. If that were so, then man, not God, would be the sovereign of the universe. But as we've seen, the Bible is clear that God is the only sovereign over His creation.

In America, where we have a government of checks and balances, we do not understand absolute sovereignty. Our President is not the sovereign of this country, because Congress can (and often

does) go against his will. And, if the people do not like him, they can vote him out of office.

But God's sovereignty is free, which is to say that He freely chooses what He wants to do and He freely accomplishes His choices and no one is able to thwart His will. Paul states God's free choice in the plainest terms (9:11-12), "For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger.'" God doesn't wait to see what choices people will make and then make up His plan to fit with their will. In other words, He doesn't devise His plan based on foreknowledge. Rather, His plan is based on His purpose according to His choice, without regard to what people may or may not do. And, His plan often goes against human custom or common thinking: "The older will serve the younger" (see, also, 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

D. God accomplishes His sovereign purpose according to His grace.

Paul illustrates God's grace by God's choosing Jacob but rejecting Esau before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad. It was "not because of works, but because of Him who calls" (9:11). The case of Ishmael showed that physical birth from Abraham does not insure God's blessing. That of Esau shows that works do not (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 355). If physical birth or good works could merit election, then it would not be an act of God's free grace.

But, what does Paul mean when he cites Malachi 1:2b-3a, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"? Some explain it to mean that God loved Esau less than He loved Jacob; but the fact remains, God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. By God's purpose according to His choice, Jacob and his descendants were the objects of God's covenant blessings, whereas Esau and his descendants were excluded from those blessings. While we should not interpret *hate* in terms of sinful human hatred, it does imply that God's just wrath for sin remained on Esau and his descendants, while God's gracious love for salvation was on Jacob and his spiritual descendants, the children of promise.

However you reconcile it with God's love for the world, the Bible also declares, "You hate all who do iniquity" (Ps. 5:5b). He doesn't just hate the sin; He hates sinners (Ps. 5:6; 11:5). Douglas Moo comments (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 587), "In an apparent paradox that troubles Paul (cf. 9:14 and 19 following) as well as many Christians, God loves 'the whole world' at the same time as he withholds his love in action, or election, from some."

Conclusion

By this point, some of you probably are thinking, "If God accomplishes His purpose through His free, gracious choice of some, while He rejects others, then He's not fair!" You may also be thinking, "If God is absolutely sovereign as you've described, then we're all just robots with no will of our own. How can God condemn robots that He has programmed to act in a certain way?" If those are your questions, then I have correctly interpreted Romans 9:6-13, because those are precisely the questions that Paul anticipates and responds to (9:14-18, 19-24). You'll have to come back when we cover those verses to hear my understanding of his answers.

But, meanwhile, does the truth of God accomplishing His sovereign purpose through His free choice of a remnant according to His grace cause you to rejoice? It should, because it shows why God's word of promise to you cannot fail. If you love God and are called according to His purpose, then you can know that God will bring you to eternal glory (8:28-30). Your salvation is certain because God always accomplishes His sovereign purpose through His free choice according to His grace.

Let me add that the truths of Romans 9 do not nullify the truth of Romans 4, that we are justified by faith in Christ. If Jacob was saved, it was because he believed in God's promised Messiah. If Esau was lost, it was because he rejected God's promised Messiah. The elect believe in Christ; the non-elect do not believe. So be diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you (2 Pet. 1:10) by trusting in Christ alone to save you.

Application Questions

1. Some argue that if God is absolutely sovereign, then He is responsible for evil. How would you answer this biblically?
2. Some contend that the doctrine of election promotes fatalism: What will be, will be. So why pray? Why witness? How would you answer this biblically?
3. One especially obnoxious author argues that if God can save people, but chooses not to, then He isn't a God of love. Why is this biblically flawed (and even blasphemous)?
4. Someone asks you, "How can I know that God has chosen me?" Your response?

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