

## Romans 9:6-13

## God's Elect of Israel, and us!

Question: what makes you think you are a Christian? I was asked this question in 1982, shortly after I became a Christian. I said, "Because Christ lives in me and I have come to trust in Him!"

We are living in crucial days when it is vital for Christians to be confident in their faith, and to be able to share the message of God's love for hurting humanity. This is important because there is a lot of confusion out there about what it means to be a Christian. Some genuinely believe that going to church, or coming from a Christian family, or baby baptism makes you a Christian. It is our job to explain the good news of the gospel, but we need to know it first.

Being a Christian is a matter of the heart, and of faith: *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should last* (John 15:16). This is election. We are Christian because of the elective grace of God which leads us to faith in Jesus Christ. And the purpose of this call is to be a channel of God's blessing to the world.

Romans 9 is about this calling and election: it's about the election of Israel. Although this makes it harder to get our heads around our passage, it will help us to understand that we also, as Christians, aren't Christian because of parentage or culture or ethnicity, but because of God's elective grace.

As soon as we start to think about election, questions come to mind like, "It's not fair!" or "Why then does God blame us?" Paul deals with these questions in Romans 9, but 9:6-13 is about the fact of election.

The big question Paul is dealing with in this passage is to ask if God's covenant with Israel had failed. Why didn't God's chosen nation, Israel, receive Jesus as their Messiah? (John 1:11) This was a big deal because it called into question the faithfulness of God.

**2Samuel 7:23-24** *And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, making himself a name and doing for them great and awesome things by driving out before your people, whom you redeemed for yourself from Egypt, a nation and its gods? And you established for yourself your people Israel to be your people forever. And you, O LORD, became their God.*

But in the light of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah, was He still their God? Were they still His people? Paul answered thus:

**Romans 9:6** *But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.*

Paul was not denying the election of ethnic Israel, as a nation (Romans 11:28). However, at the same time, he was making it clear that to be a true child of Abraham didn't (and doesn't) depend on ethnicity, i.e. who our parents are.

Paul has already made this point in Romans (Romans 2:28-29). Circumcision, as a mark of cultural and religious identity was not sufficient for salvation. Although there is nothing wrong with circumcision for the Jew (Romans 3:1-2), the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart, a work of the Spirit, circumcision of the heart. Peter's congregation were *cut to the heart* (Acts 2:37) when they heard the message of God's love in Christ, and this led them to repentance and baptism.

Paul's point is that God was dealing with Israel in his day in the same way he dealt with the patriarchs of old: by election. He illustrates this using the example of Abraham and his two sons, and Isaac and his two sons.

In the first illustration (Romans 9:7-8) Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, although both physically descended from Abraham, it was *through Isaac shall your offspring be named* (Romans 9:7). Why Isaac? Because of election! Note, however, that Ishmael was not outside the scope of God's mercy (e.g Genesis 21:13). Nevertheless Isaac was the child of promise.

John the Baptist said to the crowds, *Do not 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* (Luke 3:8). We cannot reply on parentage, or culture, or ethnicity. There is of course much advantage in coming from a Christian family, or having Christian parents, or relations. But that doesn't make you a Christian (cf Romans 3:1-2). I knew a man called Abraham, who had a son called Isaac(!), and a daughter Abigail who we baptised. We weren't baptising Abigail because of father Abraham's faith, but because Abigail was a true daughter of Abraham because of God's work and calling in her life!

But there is a potential problem with Paul's first illustration: someone might object that the blessing went to Isaac because his mother Sarah was Jewish. So Paul moves on quickly to his second illustration concerning Isaac's twin boys, Jacob and Esau (Romans 9:10-13). The difference here is that the twins had the same mother, Rebekah. Before they had even seen the light of day, or had come into the world, or had done good or bad, God's elective purposes were at work: *the older will serve the younger*. Why? Because of election! Paul backs up this point with a quote from Malachi, *Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated*. This sounds shocking to us but we need to understand it in terms of God's elective purposes and not human emotions. Like Ishmael, it is important to note that Esau was included within the scope of God's mercy (Deuteronomy 23:7, Edom = Esau,) but God chose Jacob (who was renamed Israel) to fulfil His redemptive purposes.

There is a mystery in election. Why did Pavarotti have such an outstanding voice, or why was David Beckham such a superb footballer. Both were exceptionally dedicated, but it's more than hard work. However hard I try I'm never going to be a Pavarotti or a Beckham! The gift is somehow given, and we respect it, and are blessed by it. In the same way, as Christians we should honour that fact that God chose the Jews, (although many do not,) as Jesus said: *salvation is from the Jews* (John 4:22).

Paul's point is that God was dealing with Israel in the same way he dealt with the Patriarchs, by selecting out a believing remnant. The Apostles were part of this Jewish remnant, as were the 120 who received the Spirit at Pentecost, as were the 3000 who responded to Peter's message. God's word had not failed!

*So, I ask then, has God rejected his people? By no means!* (Romans 11:1). *So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.* (Romans 11:5). In regard to the gentiles, the message of God's love has gone out into all the world, and as we will discover in Chapter 11, we Gentiles have been grafted in, but have not replaced the purposes of God for Israel

What is it that makes you a Christian? It is because somehow you know, deep down, that to be a Christian is not even about us choosing Him, but because He has chosen us, for a purpose, to go and bear fruit. His call causes us to love Him and confess Him as Lord.