

Basic Theology

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John F. Parkinson, Romans 9 in Context

Posted by [Arminian](#) on [December 4, 2011](#) in [Election](#), [Romans 9](#)

The following commentary on Romans 9 comes from John F. Parkinson, *The Faith of God's Elect* (http://gospeltractpublications.co.uk/shop/product_info.php?cPath=23&products_id=73), pages 21-28.

Note: The following text is reproduced unaltered from the original.

“The individual Jew had come to believe mistakenly that, since he was a part of Israel’s national election, he was already personally justified by God as of right. Just as the eldest son receives the family inheritance as his natural right, so the law-keeping Jew thought he was naturally entitled to personal salvation. It is Paul who enlightens us that those who share in Israel’s national election are not automatically justified (*ie.* declared righteous by God), notwithstanding their national covenants, law, promises and descent. Paul insists that his great doctrine of justification by faith applies equally to all men without distinction, whether Jew or Gentile.

It is in Romans 9 where we discover ‘they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children’ (vv 6, 7). In other words, not all Jews were automatically saved because they were natural descendants of Abraham. It is important to appreciate the context and setting of this important though much misunderstood chapter. Indeed, since this chapter is held by many to be the impregnable bastion of personal election and reprobation from eternity, it will be appropriate to examine at some length the content and flow of Paul’s argument. Paul has been establishing in the first eight chapters of his letter to the Romans that God justifies sinners *by grace alone through faith alone*. Further, he has been insisting that the Jew and the Gentile are saved on exactly the same ground of grace through faith, and that nobody is justified by works of the law.

When he comes to the ninth chapter, Paul anticipates that protests will come from the law-keeping and self-righteous Jews. First, they will make the serious charge that Paul’s gospel had certain unacceptable doctrinal implications in that the word of God ‘hath taken none effect’ or failed. Second, they will make the equally serious charge that Paul was making God out to be unjust. Paul will now address both of these anticipated objections. Lest any should accuse Paul of having become anti-Jewish, he begins by stating his sincere and selfless love for his ‘kinsmen according to the flesh’ and his highest appreciation of the national blessings relating to their adoption, glory, covenants, law, service, promises and descent. He is inspired to write one of his beautiful doxologies as he remembers that Christ, according to the

flesh, was born into their race. Paul has certainly not become anti-Jewish, but there are important spiritual lessons to be learned from the ways in which God has sovereignly moved in the history of the nation, and it is these lessons which Paul will now unfold.

First Jewish Objection

'Paul, you have been teaching that God saves by grace alone through faith alone without distinction between Jew and Gentile. But what about the law and the promises given to Israel? If what you teach is correct, then the promises have failed and the word of God has failed.'

Paul answers this anticipated objection by pointing out that it is not all of the descendants of Abraham who inherit the blessing but only those descended through Isaac, for 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called'. Paul then contrasts the children of the flesh with the children of the promise. What is the significance of this?

God made a historical choice of Isaac, in preference to Ishmael, to be the inheritor of the covenant blessings of Abraham. In this choice God was sovereign, free and unchallengeable. This observation from the nation's history is going to be used by Paul to illustrate an important spiritual truth. This he does by employing a very old literary device, the allegory. An allegory may be defined as a story in which the apparent meaning of the characters and events is used to symbolise a moral or spiritual meaning. Paul has already allegorised this same story in Galatians 4, where he expressly declares 'which things are an allegory' (v.24). The spiritual lesson now being taught is that it is the children of promise who are the children of God, and not the children of the flesh. Ishmael was a child by the flesh (Gen 16:2-4), and so resembles men in their *natural* condition. Isaac was a child by promise (Gen 18:10-11), and so resembles those who have a *spiritual* birth. The implication for Paul's Jewish readers was very clear. The promise is only to those who are spiritually reborn, thus bearing resemblance to Isaac's birth. Notice that the passage does not teach anything about an eternal decree to salvation in the case of Isaac, or to reprobation in the case of Ishmael. Paul is using Ishmael, the child by nature, as a *symbol* of unregenerate men, and Isaac the child of promise as a *symbol* of spiritually regenerate men.

But lest the Jews should say that Isaac and Ishmael had different mothers and that Ishmael was a son to Hagar the slave and had no relevance to them, Paul continues his argument by introducing two brothers who had the same father and mother in Isaac and Rebekah. Esau and Jacob were twin brothers who in Scripture become symbols of two different nations. When Rebekah was with twins, she was told by the Lord 'Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.' (Gen 25:23).

Again, there is both historical and spiritual significance in this story. On the historical level God would continue the covenant blessing through Jacob rather than Esau, the sovereign and free choice of God. The prophecy had a literal fulfillment in the ensuing and contrasting histories of Edom (Esau) and Israel (Jacob). It is customary for those commentators, who do not take the Calvinist view, to explain God's choice of Jacob and Esau in terms of their role in history. We entirely respect that position, and agree that God's sovereignty in history is in view. However, in our opinion Paul does not confine it to such.

We suggest that Paul, again employing an allegorical method, draws spiritual lessons from the case of Jacob and Esau. (By *allegory* we refer to its literary use within the Scriptures. We do not subscribe the method of interpretation known as ‘allegorising’ which is characterised by the search for a deeper meaning than is apparent in the literal statements of a text, as popularised by Origen, Jerome and Augustine.) The story of Jacob and Esau is used by Paul to illustrate that God chooses to save by grace and not by works, and that the purpose of God according to election or choice, will be on His terms alone and that works will play no part in it. The blessing has its origin in God’s gracious call. In the natural course of events Esau should have received the blessing because he was the first-born and elder son. But he was set aside in favour of his younger brother. The spiritual significance of this now becomes clear.

God had rejected and reversed the natural order so that He could bless on His own terms. Esau, being the elder son, should have had the blessings *as of right*. This is like the self-righteous Jew, or indeed anyone who works for their salvation, who feels that he should receive salvation *as of right*. On the other hand, Jacob was the younger son and had no natural right to the blessing. If he were to receive blessing it would be by grace and not by right. This illustrates the basis of salvation for any man. He must be saved by grace and not as of right. Therefore the ‘elder serving the younger’ is an illustration of *law being set aside in favour of grace*. When God speaks of loving Jacob and hating Esau, it is not His attitude to two historical individuals, but His attitude to two different manner of people typified in these twin brothers, as foretold before they were born or had done any good or evil. Jacob symbolises the believing posterity of Abraham, while Esau symbolises the unbelieving posterity of Abraham.

As in the case of Ishmael and Isaac, there is no mention whatever of any eternal decrees to personal salvation or reprobation. John Goodwin (1593-1665) in his excellent *Exposition of the Ninth Chapter to the Epistle to the Romans* wrote that the ‘apostle’s scope therein is to assert and maintain his great doctrine of justification by faith and that here he discourseth nothing at all concerning any personal election or reprobation of men from eternity’. Goodwin argues that Paul does not mention Isaac and Jacob as examples of an absolute and unconditional election of individuals to eternal life, but as illustrations of new birth and grace. A discernment of Paul’s allegorical method is the key to an understanding of this passage.

To summarise the argument thus far, Paul, for the purposes of illustration, has portrayed Ishmael as a child of the flesh, and Isaac as a child of promise. Esau the elder is a symbol of the man who claims blessing as of right, while Jacob the younger is a symbol of the man who receives blessing by grace. *The message to Paul’s Jewish reader is clear; if he is to be saved he must experience spiritual birth as illustrated in Isaac the child of promise, and he must receive it as of grace alone, as illustrated in Jacob the younger.* So the word of God has most definitely not failed. God has blessed on His own terms, which are by grace through faith, without works. The first objection has been answered. It is difficult for us to fully appreciate what a painful experience it must have been for the Jew to be told that in spiritual terms he bore more resemblance to Ishmael and Esau than he did to Isaac and Jacob.

Second Jewish Objection

‘Paul, if there be no advantage for the descendants of Abraham, or for those who apply themselves to works of the law, then God is unjust.’

Paul utterly refutes the idea that there is any unrighteousness with God in the matter of salvation. God saves by grace alone through faith alone and no self-righteous Jew will dictate otherwise to God. As He said to Moses 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy'. Mercy is entirely God's prerogative. It is God's sovereign prerogative to save by grace and to save those who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. Just as God was sovereign in the historical choice of Isaac and Jacob to be the inheritors of the covenant promises, so He is sovereign in the choice of how and whom He will save.

How does God save? - He saves *by grace*.

Whom does God save? - He saves *those who believe*.

This is the clear teaching of the first eight chapters of the epistle to the Romans. In the ninth chapter Paul's great doctrine of justification by faith is illustrated by the allegorising of certain Old Testament characters and events, for the special benefit of Paul's Jewish readers.

But if God is sovereign in whom He saves, then He is also sovereign in whom He rejects. He saves the believer, He rejects the unbeliever. Pharaoh is named as an example of an unrepentant sinner who persisted in his unbelief. The passage does not teach that God had predestined Pharaoh to damnation by an absolute decree in eternity past. Paul is pointing out that Pharaoh stands for all time as a solemn divine warning against wilful unbelief (v. 17), not unlike the manner in which Peter portrays Sodom and Gomorrah as an example unto 'those that afterwards should live ungodly' (2 Peter 2:6). W.E. Vine in his commentary *The Epistle to the Romans* (p. 136) states clearly 'that Divine retribution is not merely arbitrary, but is consequent upon man's own hardness of heart. The sovereignty of God has not been exercised by way of predestinating men to sin, as if they were helpless machines forced on by a predetermined fate and compelled thereby to reap the consequences of an evil for which they were not primarily responsible. The present condition of the Jews is chargeable, not to God, but to themselves.'

It is the sovereign will of God to have mercy on those who believe and to harden those who persist in their unbelief, and no human being whether Jew or Gentile, will dictate otherwise to God. Indeed, the very idea is as foolish as the clay dictating to the potter. The sinner has forfeited every claim on God. God's prerogative to save by grace and to display the riches of His glory by saving those who believe (vessels of mercy, prepared in this life for future glory) is unchallengeable, just as His display of wrath on unrepentant and obdurate sinners (vessels of wrath who have fitted themselves for destruction) is unchallengeable.

In God's dealings with mankind, God is completely in the right and man is completely in the wrong. The sinner does not negotiate with God in the matter of salvation and has nothing, so to speak, to put on the table. If the sinner is to be saved, it will be altogether and completely on God's own volition and terms. God will not be challenged as to how and as to whom He saves. It is God's good pleasure to save by grace and to save those who believe, whether Jew or Gentile.

Paul now advances the argument by reminding his readers that God had always intended to bring Gentiles into blessing. Paul was anxious to show that he had not invented these ideas and cites Hosea to prove to the Jewish readers that God's mercy to Gentiles was totally consistent with the prophecies of Scripture. But the Jew might well ask if something had not gone seriously wrong with prophecy if

multitudes of Gentiles were being saved compared to a relatively small number of Jews. Paul answers this possible Jewish objection by quoting Isaiah to show that the prophet had accurately foretold that only a remnant or small number of Jews would be saved.

Jews with their privileges were missing the blessing while Gentiles with godless backgrounds were being saved in large numbers. What was the explanation of this strange state of affairs? Is the passage teaching that there is some kind of absolute double predestination of individuals from eternity? Nothing could be further from Paul's argument.

The scriptural explanation is that the Gentiles had come into blessing *by faith*, but that the Jews had missed the blessing because they were pursuing righteousness *as if the blessing were based on works*. Faith alone in Christ was the great stumbling block to the Jew. The whole thrust of the argument in Romans 9 is that justification is by faith alone *even in the case of the Jew*. In this matter God is sovereign and unchallengeable.

In Romans 9 Paul has taken events and people in the nations *past* to demonstrate God's sovereignty in history. He has then allegorised these true stories to illustrate and teach the great doctrine of justification by faith. In chapter 10 he elaborates on Israel's *present* failure to enter into gospel blessing because of their ignorance of God's righteousness and their failure to grasp the significance of the finished work of Christ (v. 3, 4). Israel's guilt and responsibility are established beyond doubt in Paul's moving quotation from the prophecy of Isaiah 'But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.'

However, God has not finished with His ancient people. At this present time, says Paul, there is 'a remnant according to the election of grace' (11:5). Israel had not obtained the blessing it was seeking for, but the elect had obtained it. A number of Jews had been saved, and Paul emphasises that they were saved by grace and not by works. The elect in this context is therefore the believing Jew.

But God has still a *future* for the Jew. God is controlling history, and on a day yet to come, when the full number of the Gentiles has come in, all Israel shall be saved. The promises to Abraham and his descendants still await a glorious fulfilment when there shall come out of Zion the Deliverer who shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob. In covenant faithfulness God will take away their sins. Israel at this present time, says Paul, is the enemy of the gospel for your sakes (*ie.* you Gentiles) but as touching election they are beloved for the fathers' sakes. The word of God has not failed in any respect. In fact, Israel's present unbelief is the occasion of mercy for the Gentiles. In the course of time Israel too will obtain mercy. The fact that God has consigned all men to unbelief that He might have mercy on all inspires Paul to write one of the most beautiful doxologies in the whole Bible: 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen.' (Rom 11:33-36).

There is yet another use of the term *elect* as pertaining to believers in Israel and this occurs in the synoptic Gospels. It is the Lord who uses the term on four occasions, and each time it is in connection with the believing remnant of Israel during the tribulation period, *ie.* between the rapture of the church and the coming of the Son of Man. The Lord Jesus informed his disciples that the Son of Man would come in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory and would send his angels to 'gather together

his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other' (Matt 24:31). The reader can quickly look up all the references to check that they all apply to the believing remnant of the end time: Matt 24:22, 24, 31; Mk 13:20, 22, 27; and Lu 18:7.

To conclude this section, it may be summed up that *elect* in connection with Israel applies (1) to the whole nation in the past, (2) to believers in the nation past and present, (3) to the believing remnant in the tribulation, and (4) to the whole nation in the future millennium. In each case it is the context which provides the key to the meaning. In none of these cases, and certainly not in Romans 9, does elect or election ever refer to an absolute predestination of individuals to salvation or reprobation by unchangeable decrees from eternity."

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