

SALVATION IS FOR EVERYONE

It might be interesting for you to know that as I tried to prepare this message, I felt obligated to explain the doctrine of predestination, whether or not God chose some people were meant to be saved and some to go to eternal destruction. Betty explained to me that I was pressing too hard on this doctrine and she was right. After accepting her comments, I knew that I had to rewrite this message. After very careful study, I will tell you that God is God and I am human, and God knows much better than I why He does what He does. I hope and pray that you will begin to understand how God is in control and how we can be happy by following what He tells us to do in the Bible.

When we left off last time, we were discussing how Paul went back into the rich history of the Jews in order to prove that, first of all, God's promises never included all physical descendants of Abraham. In other words, just because you were born into a Jewish family didn't mean you automatically received God's promise for salvation.

God's promises were only for those who trusted and had faith in Him.

Romans 9:13 refers back to the Old Testament story: Ishmael, though a child of Abraham, was not included in the covenant promises; only Isaac was (Genesis 21:12). Later Jacob and Esau were born as twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. But God's purpose included one, and excluded the other. Before the boys were even born, and thus before they could have done either good or bad, so that their actions were no basis for God's choice, God announced that one was chosen and the other rejected as a participant in the covenant line. We find God's choice restated in Romans 9:13:

*13 As it is written, "I have loved Jacob, but I have **hated** Esau."*

We need to clarify that the term "*hated*," as used in this context is used in a way that the language of our modern world could not interpret properly. I believe John Stott has found the best interpretation for this verse that fits the character of the God of the Bible the best. The word "*hate*" in this verse is actually a Hebrew idiom, which means it is the grammatical form peculiar to a certain language. God didn't **hate** Esau as we would define the word, but rather he **selected** Jacob over Esau for this particular job.

Jesus Himself gives us the clue for this interpretation, when He says in Luke 14:26(NAS):

*26 "If anyone comes to Me, and does not **hate** his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.*

Whereas in Matthew 10:37, we see the very same message conveying what Jesus clearly intends in both of these passages. Jesus, in both the Luke and Matthew passages, wants us

to understand that we are not to love our families more than we love Jesus. Matthew 10:37 (NAS) reads:

37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Jesus' message is that God should be our number one priority and we should not place anything above Him.

Was it right for God to choose Jacob over Esau? Before answering that, let's keep in mind the kind of God we believe in. God is sovereign; He works for our good in everything; He is trustworthy; He will save all who believe in Him. When we understand these qualities of God, we know His choices are for good even if we don't understand all His reasons. Besides, if we honestly wanted what was completely just and right, we would have to admit we deserve condemnation for our sins. Is it fair for God to punish Christ in our place for our sins so that we might be saved? Would you think it fair if you were sentenced to death because of a crime committed by someone you didn't even know? Most people would say that it is not fair. But would you think of asking God to take back His offer of salvation because you don't deserve it? I doubt it because that would mean you would end up in Hell.

We made the point in our study of Romans chapter eight that we do not accept the interpretation of the doctrine of predestination to mean that God arbitrarily chose those who are to be saved and those who are to be condemned. We do not believe that God sat down before the world was even formed and made out a list with two main headings: one for those who were to be saved and the other for those who were to be condemned. We believe that we documented that belief with sound scriptural references. But that is not to say that God will not choose some people for a specific purpose in order to display His glory for the good of all mankind, whether it be to lead people along the path of God or others who defy God in an attempt to prove He doesn't exist. We may not understand God's reasons for doing so, but knowing the nature of God we can trust His judgment to be right on target.

If God chose Jacob over Esau, God had a good reason. Does it mean that God predetermined Esau to go to Hell before he was even born? Does this mean that God predestined who will be saved? Does it then also mean that he predestined who will go to Hell? In other words, before God created the first man and the first woman, did He determine who would go to Heaven and who would go to Hell? In a limited number of cases that could certainly be possible. God has the right to do so if it suits His will. But for the most part, we think not. God is the perfect judge. Who's to say that in the end, Esau and those like him, did not turn to God before they died, and despite their disobedience throughout their life were saved because of that eleventh hour faith? We've recited this verse many times but it's worth looking at again as we discuss this topic, 2 Peter 3:9:

*9 The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. **HE DOES NOT WANT ANYONE TO PERISH**, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent.*

So to those who ask, "Is God fair?" We answer, "Yes, He's perfectly fair." He is fair in how He deals with nations. He is fair in how He handles history. He is fair when it comes to judging you and me for our sins. He is gracious and merciful to all who accept His wonderful gift of grace and mercy. He will not judge us according to our sins as we deserve if we believe. When we believe in and accept for ourselves Jesus' great sacrifice on the cross, He extends to us salvation and freedom from the punishment our sins require. If we refuse to accept that wonderful gift, then God's fairness will prevail and we will be required to accept the punishment for our own sins.

So the choice is up to you. It is up to you as an individual whether you choose to accept God's grace and mercy or whether you will insist He be "fair" with you. The bottom line is that it is up to the individual as to whether they will choose to accept the truth of God and Jesus, or reject it. In other words, anyone who has heard the gospel message is responsible for where they will spend eternity, and there are only two alternatives.

Now we may overlap a bit in this next section on what we've already discussed, but we consider it essential to look at this subject in just a little more detail.

Another general fact clearly revealed in Scripture (Romans 2:6-10) is that men and women are to be judged according to their works, and according to the light which they have enjoyed, which means the truth to which they have been exposed. Those who willfully sin after having a knowledge of God's will, shall be judged without mercy; and those who sinned without having such knowledge, without having heard the Gospel message of Jesus, shall be judged less severely (Matthew 11:20-24).

Jesus, the Judge of all the earth, will do right by every individual who has ever lived. No human being will suffer more than he deserves, or more than his own conscience shall recognize as just.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, held that God reaches out to every person offering them a personal relationship with Him, and insuring each person an opportunity to respond. I believe Wesley is right on target based on the overall nature of God we find throughout the Bible.

It is important that we remember that Romans 9:13 appears in the middle of Paul's letter to the Romans, a letter that clearly details how both Jewish and Gentile believers are equal before God. It didn't matter to God whether a person was a Jew or something else other than a Jew. The main requirement for acceptance by God was faith and trust in Him.

Paul, in the first section of the book Romans, argued that Jews are just as lost as Gentiles,

there is no difference between the two. Having the law is not what brings the blessing of God, but rather **living the law**. And you can't live the law without the saving power of Jesus Christ. Paul's main points are that both Jews and Gentiles needed Jesus' sacrificial death and, that if a person, whether Jew or Gentile, is committed to Jesus, he or she has all of God's salvation because of the work of Jesus on the cross. The **Holy Spirit**, whom every believer receives as a gift resulting from their faith in Christ, is the solution to human sin. Although we have to cooperate with the **Holy Spirit**, He is the one who makes us children of God.

We believe Romans 8:28 shows us that those "*who love God*" are those who are the "*called*." Let's look at this verse again to confirm this:

28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

If we were to translate this verse literally from the original Greek it would read:

*And we know with an absolute knowledge that **for those who are loving God**, all things are working together resulting in good, **for those who are called ones according to His purpose**.*

It is not just the Jewish people who are called, but **EVERYONE** who **hears and responds** to the Gospel message. Those who hear the message, believe, and accept it are those who are "*called*." It is part of God's grand plan to redeem human beings from sin, to spread the Gospel throughout the earth and to bring His redemption to those human beings who turn to Him.

Now we've reached a point where we need to clearly understand something. The book of Romans is a letter Paul wrote to whom? Was he writing to everyone who lived in Rome? No, he was writing to the church in Rome. He was writing to the Christians who belonged to the church in Rome, the majority of whom were converted Jews, Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior that they were so long promised throughout the Old Testament. Many of them were suffering severe persecution at the hands of the Roman government. You've probably heard some of the horror stories about early Christians being fed to the lions in the Roman Coliseum for the entertainment of the crowds. Many of these Jews were questioning the goodness of God under such circumstances and Paul wanted to reassure them that God would provide for their eternal salvation even under such difficult circumstances.

Paul is in the middle of a section where he has been talking about the sufferings of the Christian life. Now he is telling them the purpose of their sufferings. However unpleasant they may be, these sufferings do not mean that God has forgotten them. "*On the contrary*," Paul says, "*when you were called through the Gospel message which you heard, it was part of a plan of God. That plan was not to leave you as you were.*"

God's plan was for people to hear the Gospel message, accept it by faith, and receive salvation. God, according to His plan, wanted to enter into a relationship with all who believed in order to make all believers like Jesus.

Paul says, "*Part of that, of course, is suffering, but the other part is glory. So when the plan is complete you will stand before God fully justified and gloried, in the very image of his Son.*" That is why in Romans 8:31–39 we get the exclamations of praise to God. Christians have not fallen out of his hand; even when they do not see Him, He is right there with them helping them toward His glorious purpose for them.

So what is God saying about predestination? All those who love God are predestined. God has a previously thought-out plan for them. And that plan is to make them like Jesus. In this security every lover of God can rest, even if their present life seems full of pain and chaos.

This whole question of how the sovereignty of God, as expressed through the concept of predestination, balances with the concept of human beings having free will and the ability to choose what they will do about their eternal destiny is one that in reality is quite beyond our human, finite minds to comprehend. And I, personally, can rejoice in that. It means that our great wonderful Lord God, the Maker of heaven and hearth, Jehovah, has a mind that is far more complex and thorough than mine is. He is bigger and greater and smarter than I am! What a relief! I don't have to understand every whit of what He says in His Word. In fact, I can't understand everything. And that's OK.

You may have heard of Soren Kierkegaard. He was a philosopher, but more than that he was a theologian who was very instrumental in reforming the Danish church, which at the time was very cold and the pastors' sermons were nothing but showy speeches. If Scripture didn't fit their ideas, they discarded it. According to Ron Walters, a former pastor who is now a vice-president of Salem Communications:

[Kierkegaard's] fight to personalize the faith served as a blowtorch to the icy Church of Denmark.

His theological trump-card was faith. He reasoned that Christianity, by necessity, was completely irrational. "No one can be born again by objective examination." Rather, a "leap of faith" is what propels us into God's family.

God's methods, as well as His trademark, have always been fueled by logical impossibilities. He eternally lives out of the box.

John Stott quotes Charles Simeon of Cambridge, who was equally committed to both the doctrine of election or predestination and to the doctrine of free choice, as using this analogy to defend his stance:

As wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet [serve] a common end, so may truths apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each

other, and equally [serve] the purposes of God in the accomplishment of man's salvation.

God Himself puts it this way: **Isaiah 55:8-9:**

8"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD.

9"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

Because God is God and because His mind is so much greater and wiser than ours, there are some things about God and His plan that we just have to accept on faith. Some way, somehow God in His great wisdom has perfectly worked out predestination and His desire to have all people come into His kingdom in such a way that allows for the total free will of man, yet is all part of God's plan. In heaven, we may come to understand just how He balanced it and how it all worked together. While we are here on earth we have to trust His love, trust His wisdom, and believe that He truly has a marvelous plan that we can't even conceive of.

Now let's go on to Romans 9:14-18:

14 What can we say? Was God being unfair? Of course not!

15 For God said to Moses, "I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose."

16 So receiving God's promise is not up to us. We can't get it by choosing it or working hard for it. God will show mercy to anyone he chooses.

17 For the Scriptures say that God told Pharaoh, "I have appointed you for the very purpose of displaying my power in you, and so that my fame might spread throughout the earth."

18 So you see, God shows mercy to some just because he wants to, and he chooses to make some people refuse to listen.

These verses repeat in a little different way most of what we've already discussed. They do begin an explanation, however, that continues throughout the rest of the chapter emphasizing God's mercy and grace, and how He has opened the door to His kingdom to all people everywhere who believe and trust in what He says. Part of believing and trusting God means getting clear the relationship between the Creator and the thing created. God is the Creator and human beings are the thing created.

We should understand by this time that God is good, just, merciful, loving, gracious, and all powerful. He really doesn't need any of our input in order to make the right decisions, and by the simple fact that He made us, He has every right to do with us what His holy and perfect nature leads Him to do. And who is capable of determining how God would judge a person's eternity? After all, we've just learned beyond any doubt that God is perfectly just. I've no doubt there would be different judgments for me depending on whether or not God made me to be evil or I chose to be evil on my own.

But based on what was said in verses 14 through 18, there will be those who pose the question that comes in verse 19, Romans 9:19:

19 Well then, you might say, "Why does God blame people for not listening? Haven't they simply done what he made them do?"

If salvation is due entirely to God's will, which it is according to verses 15 and 18, and we can't resist His will, as none of us would be able to do, then why does God still hold us responsible for our decisions? Paul's first response to this question comes in verses 20 and 21, Romans 9:20,21 (NAS):

20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?

21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

Paul asks here if we have truly understood what kind of a relationship exists between us and God. Just as the potter has the right to shape his clay into vessels for different purposes, so does God have the right to deal with fallen humanity according to His purposes. It is not suggested in these verses that God has created sinful human beings in order to punish them, but rather He has the right to deal with sinful human beings according to His perfect standards, either to pardon or to punish them. Paul continues this line of reasoning in Romans 9:22,23:

22 God has every right to exercise his judgment and his power, but he also has the right to be very patient with those who are the objects of his judgment and are fit only for destruction.

23 He also has the right to pour out the riches of his glory upon those he prepared to be the objects of his mercy.

God's patience in judging people will keep the door of opportunity open longer for them to be saved. After all, He gives us all of our lives to make a decision to accept His gift of forgiveness, mercy, and salvation. Even if people do it with the last breath they take in this life, they will receive God's gift of salvation and eternal life. And in verse 24 Paul tells us that now through the work of Jesus, everyone is included in this promise, all people everywhere. Paul continues by explaining in verses 25-29, that although He first chose Israel as His people to carry the message to all the peoples of the world, Israel failed to be obedient to God's commission and now He has intervened to make it clear that salvation is available to all mankind who are willing to accept His plan for salvation. Further it is made clear in these verses that only those in the nation of Israel who accept that plan will be saved and that God knows only a small number of them will do so, Romans 9:25-29:

25 Concerning the Gentiles, God says in the prophecy of Hosea, "Those who were not my people, I will now call my people. And I will love those

whom I did not love before.”

26 And, “Once they were told, ‘You are not my people.’ But now he will say, ‘You are children of the living God.’ ”

27 Concerning Israel, Isaiah the prophet cried out, “Though the people of Israel are as numerous as the sand on the seashore, only a small number will be saved.

28 For the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth quickly and with finality.”

29 And Isaiah said in another place, “If the Lord Almighty had not spared a few of us, we would have been wiped out as completely as Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Then in verses 30:33 Paul writes:

30 Well then, what shall we say about these things? Just this: The Gentiles have been made right with God by faith, even though they were not seeking him.

31 But the Jews, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded.

32 Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law and being good instead of by depending on faith. They stumbled over the great rock in their path.

33 God warned them of this in the Scriptures when he said, “I am placing a stone in Jerusalem that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall. But anyone who believes in him will not be disappointed.”

Paul, in conclusion asks, “Based on all I’ve said, what conclusion can be drawn?” To describe unbelievers (Gentiles) as not seeking God is a colossal understatement. Most unbelievers are self-centered, going their own way, lovers of themselves, of money and pleasure, rather than lovers of God and of goodness. Nevertheless, because of God’s grace and mercy, they were given what they did not seek. When they heard the Gospel of salvation by faith, the Holy Spirit worked so powerfully in them that many of them accepted the message brought by Jesus. But the great majority of the people of Israel who maintained they could achieve goodness on their own, rejected Jesus’ message. They did not obtain salvation because they were pursuing an impossible goal. The bottom line here is that those who believe they can obtain salvation on their own will never have it. Those who did not pursue it, but realized they could not obtain it on their own were given it by faith alone.

Why do people stumble over a stone? Why do people stumble over the need to believe in the work of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation? Because it undermines our self-righteousness. To make this humiliating confession is an intolerable offense to our pride. So instead of humbling ourselves we stumble over the stumbling stone. The point here is that God has laid down a solid foundation for us, a rock or a stone, which is Jesus Christ. So everybody has to decide how to relate to this rock which God has laid down. There are only two possibilities. One is to put our trust in Him, to take Him as the foundation for

our lives and build on Him. The other is to allow our pride to say, “I don’t need His help,” and thereby stumble and fall into eternal separation from God in what the Bible calls Hell.