God's Choice
Romans 9:1-14

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 8, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

1 I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, 4 the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. 5 Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

6 It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. 7 Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 8 In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. 9 For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

10 Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. 11 Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: 12 not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." 13 Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

14 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! (Romans 9:1-14, NIV)

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."[1] This is the place Rick left us last week in Romans. And as he made clear, this is the stunning crescendo of the very heart of the gospel which Paul is presenting here in Romans. God is *for* us. God is for *you!* That means nobody can ever stand against us. In Jesus Christ we have become God's beloved sons and daughters *forever*. Nothing can change that. Nothing can separate us from that love. If you don't believe this is true, you should at least want this to be true! Amen?

So here's a hard question. Why doesn't everybody believe this good news? Of course, some people in the world have never yet heard this good news, and so I understand that they don't believe. But what about the countless people who have heard it, many of whom grew up surrounded by it, even immersed in it, and yet still do not believe?

Before I came to this congregation I spent 15 years working in youth ministry. Over that span I had the chance, alongside others, to share this good news with hundreds of young people over the years, many of whom grew up in the church in Christian families. As I've had contact with many of them over the years ever since, it's become clear that while some of them have trusted Jesus and continue to this day to follow him as his disciples, many more have walked away from Jesus. Or even if they still believe he is real, they don't trust him enough to follow him in any ways that lead to any significant impact in their lives. Why? I mean, these kids all heard the exact same messages of good news we shared with them week after week. And we didn't just present the gospel to them with words, we loved on these kids, as best we could, with the love of Christ. Nevertheless, many of them, maybe even most of them, walked away in the end.

Why doesn't everybody believe? Isn't it God's desire that everybody believe and be saved? I think of that verse in 2nd Peter 3:9: **"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."** Has God failed here? Has God changed his mind? Come up short?

You know, the message of the gospel seems so clear to many of us. Perhaps not all of us– I get that. Some of us here are still trying to understand the gospel before we can even consider believing it. But for many of us, it's clear. I've come to appreciate this summary of the gospel by American pastor, John Mark Comer:

[1] Romans 8:38-39. This and all biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

> God has drawn near to us in Jesus – us, we who are sinful, broken, wounded, mortal, dying and incapable of self-saving, with many of us completely uninterested in God or even enemies of God – to draw us into his inner life, to heal us by immersing us within the fold of his Trinitarian love, and then to send us out into the world as agents of his love.[2]

I believe that. Many of you believe that. And yet so many others we know who have heard this message stubbornly persist in unbelief. Many of these are people we know and love – our own spouses, children, grandchildren, best friends! Our hearts ache for these people we love, we ache to have them know and believe this saving truth. And it must be God's desire for them to do so! So why don't they?

I hope you can see that Paul shares this heartache, specifically for his own people, the Jews. In his words, **"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart."** To be clear, this heartache isn't just for *some* of the Jews, but for *all* of the Jews who don't believe. If you just finished reading the book of Acts with us you know that many of the Jews of that day hated Paul, even wanted to kill him. Yet he has great sorrow and unceasing anguish even for them!

I don't know about you, but I find this very convicting. Is this how you feel about lost people in our world, not just people you love and who love you in return, but even those you don't know, even those who want nothing to do with you? I mean, think about what Paul says here. In verse 3 he declares, **"I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people."** Do you understand what he's saying? He's saying that if it were possible, he would willingly choose to be damned and go to hell if it meant that the Jewish people would then, as a result, enter into salvation in God's kingdom! He knows this is not possible, of course. He just told is in chapter 8 that nothing can ever separate him from God's love in Christ. Still, if it were possible he'd do it!

Would you ever say such a thing and mean it? Would you be damned to save others? Your loved ones? Maybe. Your enemies? Who in the world would face condemnation from God if it meant his or her enemies could come to know the love and grace of God?

You know who. *This is exactly what Christ did!*[3] Galatians 3:13 declares, **"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."** On the cross Jesus willingly accepted the forsakenness of God so that we could know the belovedness of God. So can you see that Paul here is reflecting the very heart of Christ when he says that he is willing to give up everything for the salvation of even his enemies. One commentator called this "a spark from the fire of Christ's substitutionary love."[4] In other words, Paul only loves like this because this is how Paul knows he has been loved. As 1st John 4:19 succinctly puts it, **"We love because he first loved us."** And to the extent that we come to love like this it is because, *and only because*, we also have come to know the love of Christ. We give ourselves away for others because Jesus first gave himself away for us.

Before moving on, let me point out something else. Paul, of course, is not only concerned for the Jews who are lost. His whole God-given mission in life is to share the gospel with the lost Gentiles, the non-Jews. In other words, he doesn't just care for his own tribe. However, isn't it natural that as a Jew himself that he would have a special concern for the Jewish people? Of course it is.

In a similar way, there is no doubt that Christ wants us to share his heart for all those who are lost in this world, the people across the world as much as the people across the street or the people across the dinner table. Some of us, in fact, are called like Paul to go and share the gospel in faraway places. God, for example, has put the nation of Kenya on our hearts, Esther and me. And yet, Christ has also placed us here in America, specifically here in Sacramento at this time. And so I believe that just as the Kenyan church, for example, should have a special burden for the people of Kenya, so the American church should have a special (though, again, not exclusive) burden for this nation.

The Methodist founder John Wesley once declared, "The world is my parish." In a broader sense he was affirming that we are to share Paul's burden for all the lost in all the world. But in another sense, he's reminding us that our parish isn't just the people of the church. It includes the people beyond the church, starting in our own families, our own neighborhoods, our own nation, and, when the Lord calls us, even to faraway places across the world. But generally, that burden starts closest to home. I think of what Jesus told the demon-possessed man in Mark 5 after he restored him, **"Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."**[5] After all, if the church in

---

[2] Source unknown.

[3] Moses actually said something quite similar at one point on behalf of Israel when he prayed to the Lord, **"But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."** (Exodus 32:32)

[4] James Denney, cited by John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 264.

[5] Mark 5:19. See also Acts 1:8 and Luke 24:47 for instances where we are told to begin our witness at home.

this neighborhood and this city doesn't have a burden for the people of Sacramento, who will?

Having said that, I've heard the argument that since most Americans who are not Christians have at least already been exposed to Jesus and the message of the gospel, maybe we should concentrate our efforts on those who haven't yet been exposed in other harder-to-reach parts of the world. The Canadian missions pastor, Oswald Smith, once famously declared, "Why should anyone hear the gospel twice, before everyone has heard it once?"[6] If people don't believe, they don't believe. So let's move on.

Notice, however, that Paul points out here that perhaps nobody has been presented with more evidence for the gospel than the Jewish people of his day, and yet he's not ready to move on. In verses 4–5 he lists eight unique privileges that the Jews had, everything from God's adoption of them as his chosen people, to being the very bearers of the ancestry of the Messiah. Jesus, remember, was Jewish! And so of all people, the Jews should have believed. To be sure, some of them did. But many did not, in spite of all the advantages they had going for them. But again, this fact does not diminish the burden Paul carries for them. And the burden we carry for those around us in America who have already heard the gospel twice or more should also not be diminished. (note on respecting Israel?)

Still, none of this gets us any closer to answering the main question I posed earlier, which is why, in spite of all the evidence, and in spite of our efforts to share the gospel, why do so many people persist in unbelief when clearly God wants all people to believe? Why save some and not others? Has God failed us? Has God failed them?

Paul's answer is an emphatic "No!". In verse 6 he writes, "**It is not as though God's word had failed.**" That's his simple answer, though his explanation will take at least the rest of the chapter. I want to look at the first part of that explanation this morning. But a warning, there's more to come and I'm going to leave you hanging at the end today, which I know will be a bit frustrating. At least you've been warned. In a way, this sermon is a two-parter.

Here's the *main thing* we can say this week. The fact is that *it is God's sovereign will that some believe and others do not believe.* To put it starkly, *the Lord chooses some and not others.* This truth should not surprise us. This message was declared all through the Old Testament. Isaiah 8:14 is a perfect example. The prophet here, looking ahead to the Messiah, declares this about him,

> **He will be a holy place;**
> **for both Israel and Judah he will be**
> **a stone that causes people to stumble**
> **and a rock that makes them fall.**
> **And for the people of Jerusalem he will be**
> **a trap and a snare.**[7]

For some, Christ will be a holy place. But for others, a stumbling block. Paul says the same thing right here in this passage when he declares in verse 6 that, "**not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.**" The name Israel has always referred to God's people. So how could some of God's people not be God's people? Well, because inclusion in God's family isn't ultimately about ethnicity. In fact, there have always been two Israels, those who are descended physically from Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, and those who also have a spiritual legacy or birthright. Earlier in Romans Paul uses circumcision to make this point. He writes, **"A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical."**[8] In other words, some Jews are only Jews outwardly. Many of them, in fact, are very religious. But true Israelites are not only changed on the outside, but changed on the inside, transformed in their hearts by the Spirit of God.

It's no different in our context. It's the old line, "Sitting in a church building on Sunday morning doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a McDonald's makes you a hamburger!" We don't inherit our place in God's family because of our ethnicity, or our family tradition, or even our religious practices. None of this makes us entitled. Again, it's simply that the Lord chooses some and not others. Even Jesus affirmed this when he declared in John 13:18, **"I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen."** He echoes this in John 15:16 when he tells those he has chosen, **"You did not choose me, but I chose you."** We don't choose God; God chooses us. And God only chooses some of us.

Paul goes to great ends here to make this point, and to show that this has been God's way from the beginning. Specifically, he uses two famous examples from Genesis. He's first takes us back to the very beginning when God starting choosing people by first choosing Abraham. He refers first to Isaac, Abraham's son, in verse 7. Isaac, as you may know, was not Abraham's firstborn son. That would be Ishmael. And normally in those days the line and inheritance and blessing would pass to the oldest son. But not here. God instead chooses Isaac, the second born, and not Ishmael, the firstborn.

---

[6] Source unknown. Though I remember first hearing this quote from Tony Campolo at the Urbana Missions Conference in the 80's.

[7] See also Isaiah 53:1-3, Psalm 119:22-23, and Zechariah 12:10.

[8] Romans 2:28

In Paul's words, the "promise," as he calls it, doesn't pass automatically through birth, but by God's choice.

Paul then uses the example of Isaac's children. You may remember that Rebecca, Isaac's wife, became pregnant with twins. Esau was born first, setting himself up to be the heir to the promise. But it was not to be. Paul reminds us that God instead choose Jacob, the younger one, instead. Ishmael and Isaac had different mothers, though Abraham was their father. So, some might argue, that's why God chose Isaac. But in this case, Esau and Jacob not only had the same mother and father, but shared the same womb at the same time! And yet, for his own reasons God chose Jacob and did not choose Esau. This was not an arbitrary choice, God playing eeny, meeny, miney, moe with these two boys. But neither was it a choice that had anything at all to do with the character or future performance of either one. Paul makes clear that God made his choice **"before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad."** In fact, if you know the story you know that neither Esau or Jacob were exemplary characters, and that it might be argued that Jacob was the bigger scoundrel of the two. Still, God, *for his own reasons*, chose Jacob and not Esau, which gives us a clear answer to a hard question, but an answer we may not like all that much.

This is easy to understand, but hard to accept. God not only chooses some and not others, but this has always been his way since the beginning. And to us – let's be honest – that does not seem fair. Paul knows this will be our response. It's why he writes in verse 14, "**What shall we say? Is God unjust?"** He's knows that's what we will say. Isn't that what you want to say? It's not fair! Thankfully, Paul doesn't leave us without a response to our objection, though I'm going to leave you because you're going to have to wait until next week to hear it.

Don't say you weren't warned. I told you I was going to leave you frustrated. This week it was important for us to take the time we have to understand this first main point which Paul is establishing here, which again is that people around us in the world, lost people for whom our hearts may breaks, do not chose God because God has not chosen them. Isn't that what scripture, here and elsewhere, makes clear? But so I don't leave you totally hanging with this hard truth, let me at least say this before next week. I acknowledge that this truth, sometimes called election, creates enough problems for us that many people want to reject it. Many people, probably some of us, want to reject the idea that God chooses some and not others, and to do so because of how unfair it seems. And yet can you see that if we reject this truth because of the problems it creates, doing so may actually create even more problems?

You see, when we discover that God's choice of us has absolutely nothing to do with us, our goodness, our accomplishments, our ethnicity, even our willingness to choose God, we are then left with zero room for boasting. We receive no glory. All the glory goes to God. We declare with the psalmist in Psalm 115:1, **"Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness."** We are in no way authors of our own salvation. That means that if you find yourself chosen by God, a recipient of his grace and love through Jesus Christ, this truth makes it impossible for you to give yourself any credit.[9] And if we reject this truth of a God who chooses, then the main problem it creates is that we must also reject the idea that we were saved by grace alone, and in turn deceive ourselves into thinking instead that God chose us because we deserved his favor in some way because of our ethnicity, our moral superiority, our religious commitments, our goodness.[10] And then it follows that God also did *not* choose others because they were not as deserving as us. So can you see that if we set aside this truth that God chooses some and not others because it's problematic, we just create more problems?

Still, I know what you're thinking, because I'm thinking the same thing. What about faith? What role does free will play in all this? Do we have no say in the matter? Can it really be true that God chooses some and not others and that's the end of the discussion, regardless of how we respond? That's a hard truth to swallow, made harder when we read verses like Ephesians 1:4 where Paul writes, **"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."** If God chose us before we chose him, before we were even born, how does faith fit in? What about free will? And what about all those verses we can quote, even from Jesus' own mouth, that tell us that *anybody* who places their faith in Christ will be saved?

I promise you we will address this contradiction fully next week. But for now let me at least give you a little relief by affirming that yes, faith and free will still matter and, in fact, are essential to salvation. Of course, how these two seemingly contradictory truths fit together, that's the question.

But is it at least possible that even though they will never fit nicely together in our minds, that they might fit together somehow in God's mind? God chooses us

---

[9] I think of Ephesians 2:8-9 – **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."**

[10] I'm indebted here to Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 62-63.

before we choose God, and also we must still choose God. Honestly, how God might possibly harmonize these two things is beyond me.[11] But this is not the only place where we struggle with such tensions. How can God possibly be one God and three persons at the same time? That makes no sense. How can Jesus possibly be fully human and fully divine *at the very same time?* That makes no sense. And can we be saved by grace alone and not by works, and yet at the same time have no salvation if we don't have good works? At many points along the way in the Christian faith we come up hard against seemingly contradictory truths, these paradoxes, that God's Word is asking us to nonetheless hold together in our faith.

But should we be surprised to find that infinite truth cannot be reduced to fit cleanly in our finite minds? Aren't God's ways always so much higher than our ways, which actually should not surprise us if he is God and we are his creatures? Imagine the alternative, if we could actually comprehend all the divine and eternal truths of God. Would such a God even be worthy of our worship? He would not.

That's probably enough for today. I know I'm leaving you with tension. We will come back to this next week as we look at the rest of chapter 9, though I can't promise you that all the tension will be resolved next week. For reasons I just stated, I can assure you that it won't. Still, that doesn't mean that there isn't more we can say. There is. And the explanation Paul offers here in the following verses is extremely helpful towards that end. I encourage you to read ahead this week and begin to reflect yourself on what he says here.

Let's end, however, by allowing this truth to become personal. Listen to me. If you have come to know the favor and grace and salvation of God in Christ in your life, can you see what good news it is to hear that it was God who chose you first, and chose you out of his sovereign will and grace, and not because of anything in you that made you worth choosing! For if God chose you because of something in you, what a terrifying prospect! Because how despairing it is to think what might happen when that something in you that made you worth choosing stops living up to his standards. But if God chose to love you simply because it was his will to do so, that means that there truly is nothing in heaven and earth that can ever separate you from that love.

Amen.

[11] I'm indebted here to Pastor John MacArthur here for some of this phrasing from this short clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88WvD_Tvv_o While I want to credit him where he is due, I do also want to clarify that there are other points in his teaching that I do find problematic.

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Romans 9:1-14 again. What do you notice? What stands out to you?

2. Paul has a great burden in his heart for his fellow Jews who do not know Christ, a burden that causes "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart. Do you have that kind of burden for others in the world? If so, how did that happen? If not, how do you think a person cultivates that sort of concern for the lost?

3. Here's the question: *Why do some people believe and others not believe?* How do you answer that question? And does this mean that God, in some way, has failed?

4. Consider the two stories from Genesis that Paul uses here as examples. God chooses Isaac and not Ishmael. God chooses Jacob and not Esau. What do we make of this?

5. This was given as a summary of this passage: *It is God's sovereign will that some believe and others do not believe. The Lord chooses some and not others.* Is that a good summary? How do you respond?

6. Consider these two statements alongside one another in preparation for next week. #1 – God chooses some and not others for salvation. #2 – Anyone who comes to faith in Christ will be saved. Are both these true? If so, how can we hold them together?

7. If it's true that your salvation is entirely the result of God choosing you, what does that mean for you? How do you respond? How does that leave you feeling?

8. Where is the good news in all this?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Why would God choose us to be his people?
Why does God choose anybody?