

Scripture introduction

Today's Genesis passage is an illustration in need of an explanation. I don't think that Abraham, Isaac, or Esau and Jacob had any understanding of God's overarching motivation towards mercy over judgment. But I do think that both Joseph and Moses, later in life, came to a good understanding of how God's mercy directs the course of human events. And that is the reason why Moses included these stories in his Genesis record.

As I have mentioned several times, no story is in the book of Genesis merely as a matter of historical record, but each one was structured in such a way to cause us, the listeners, to ask questions about the nature of God or humanity and to provide our teacher an opportunity to explain the mysterious workings of God.

So let us go first to the illustration of the twin's birth ([Read Genesis 25:19-34](#)).

And now let's turn to our instructor the Apostle Paul to see if we can't tease some understanding out of God's saying "*even before they are born...I have loved Jacob but hated Esau.*" ([Read Romans 9:1-16](#))

The Fairness of God versus All Heel Grabbers. Genesis 25:19-34, Romans 9:1-16

Portions adapted from "The Potter's Freedom" by Timothy Peck

One day a very frustrated Calvin was complaining to his Dad: "*Life isn't fair.*" "*I know, but why can't it ever be unfair in my favor?*" (Cartoon Calvin and Hobbs).

There are certain phrases parents expect to hear from their children. Phrases like "*Why?*" or, "*But Greg's parents let him do it.*" And for certain, they will hear early and often: "***That's not fair!***" We said it as kids, and when we became parents our kids said it to us. And of course the standard response, which we learned from our parents and that we pass on to our kids is, "***Life's not fair.***"

And then there is the Christian commentary on this reply which is "***and you had better be glad it isn't (fair)***", *something which we will get back to in a few moments.*

When you are a child, you expect everything to be fair. Your budding sense of justice demands that the whole world run impartially. But as we get older, we tend to grow more cynical about fairness, at least in this lifetime. Even then we still hold out hope that at least there's one person who is always fair: God.

Even if a criminal slips through justice in this life, we hope they don't slip past God's justice. Even when we're wronged and betrayed by others, or tricked out of our hard earned money, at least we can trust that person will have to answer to God. So even if life isn't fair, at least we can trust God to be fair. Isn't that what scripture teaches? '*Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.*' (Romans 12:19)

But what if God isn't fair? What if God plays favorites, or if God's definition of fairness is different from our definition of fairness? When a person begins to doubt God's fairness, that suspicion erodes the very core of their confidence in God.

How can you trust someone who isn't impartial?

How can you put your confidence in someone who seems to choose one over another?

Today, as we move back to our Genesis studies, we find the perfect illustration of God's fairness—in the face of what appears to be His obvious favoritism in choosing Jacob over Esau. But we will need Rabbi Paul to unravel this mystery for us. And so we turn to the Book of Romans.

Romans is Paul's theological masterpiece, a book in which he very carefully explains through the first eight chapters that since ALL are sinners and NONE can live up to the righteousness of God, that by His love, grace, mercy—all those wonderful characteristics of God—He has, through the work of His son Jesus

the Messiah, provided forgiveness and salvation freely to ALL who call upon His name. Paul concludes his lengthy treatise on "salvation by grace through faith" with this summary:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ...What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us all things?(Romans 8:28-32)

But now with chapter 9, Paul has to deal with a very big "elephant" in the middle his Gospel message which is, ***if Jesus Christ was the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to all people through the people of Israel, then why did the majority of Jewish people reject Jesus as their Messiah?***

While Paul is quick to assure us that God is not yet done with Israel; nevertheless, because Israel has now rejected Jesus, God has created the Christian Church to continue His purposes in this next stage of His eternal plan. Paul's answer is this: that just as God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, so now in His mercy He has chosen the Church over Israel for the sharing of His "Good News."

So why did God choose Abraham, out of all the thousands of possible people, to give His covenant promises to? We might answer, because Abraham believed God and stepped out in faith--which is true to a certain extent.

OR we can ask why did God choose Isaac over Ishmael to pass along the Abrahamic covenant? And we can answer that by noting that conceiving Ishmael was by Abraham's effort contrary to God's promise, but the birthing of Isaac was proof that God keeps His promises—even if it requires a miracle, "*But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you*" (Genesis 17:21).

But now we get to **Esau and Jacob** twins, who as the Apostle Paul explains, "*even before they were born or had done good or bad,*" God had determined that the younger brother Jacob would be the one to carry forward Abraham's covenant and that "*the elder would serve the younger.*" Where is the justice in that (especially for Esau)?

And, as we look at Jacob's and Esau's lives in the next few weeks, we will learn that neither of them was of sterling character, so it was not the matter of one being more deserving of God's blessing over the other. Why then did God choose to bless the younger twin over his older brother? Good question; let's let Paul explain.

A person could look at God's nation building strategy and conclude that God isn't fair. God's choice to bless Abraham out of all the peoples, his choice of Isaac over Ishmael, his choice of Jacob over Esau, his choice of Israel over all the other ancient nations, and now his choice of the Church over Israel could be construed as God playing favorites. Why is God so apparently unfair in the way he's working out his plan? Paul gives us three answers.

The first truth is that while we can't understand God's workings, we can trust his motives.

In verses 11-18, Paul poses a question: Does Israel's rejection of their Messiah mean that God somehow had failed or been unjust towards the Jewish people (6, 14)? And Paul's resounding answer is "**BY NO MEANS.**" God's blessings have always been given by His choice--as illustrated by Esau and Jacob, not by any obligation of heritage or deservedness on the receiver's part.

Paul then quotes a conversation between God and Moses as proof of God's merciful choices:

[God said] to Moses, 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,
and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy..'

Now, at first it's unclear exactly how this quotation from Exodus 33:19 demonstrates God's fairness. But when you look at the context of the conversation it makes more sense. Moses has asked a personal favor from God and he tries to bargain for it based on how much work he has done for God; in other words, Moses thinks he deserves this favor.

God replies that since He does favor Moses, He will grant his wish but God is also quick to point out that He is doing so because of His own desire to extend mercy and not because of anything that Moses has earned from him.

Notice, that God doesn't say, "*I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show cruelty on whom I will show cruelty.*" He doesn't say, "I'm fair with some people, and unfair with others." The emphasis here is on God's unqualified mercy and compassion extended to all without any regard for human deservedness—things which are characteristics at the very center of God's nature.

So Paul's answer to us, as illustrated by God's answer to Moses, is that **God's mercy is something He has always freely given according to His own merciful purposes, not according to our worthiness or unworthiness**; which is the main message in his letter to the Roman Church: salvation comes by grace through faith for all who will receive it.

So God's strategy of offering a reconciled relationship through faith in His Son was never dependent on whether Israel believed or rejected Jesus as their Messiah; Israel was only promised to be the vehicle through which the Messiah came. God's merciful purposes for our lives have never been thwarted by another's acceptance or rejection of such.

Whether it is a Moses who thinks he had earned a favor, or a Pharaoh who defies God, or Israel who has stumbled in rejecting their Messiah, we can trust in God's fairness because GOD'S MAIN MOTIVATION IS MERCY—DESERVED OR NOT. So God is not unjust, but rather God's mercy moves beyond justice to give us not what we deserve—but what we most desperately need, forgiveness.

So we can trust God even if we can't always understand His actions, because we can always trust God's motive, which is to bestow mercy to as many as possible.

Like every child I know, I hated vaccinations and I do believe that the needles they used on me were so much bigger than the needles they used on my children. Still it did not make it any easier to take them for their shots. When Forrester got his first shot the startled look of pained surprise on his face, melted my heart. His little face reddened and he let out a terrible scream. He didn't understand why I would allow people to do such a painful, horrible thing to him. He looked at me like I was betraying him, yet he also cried out for me to comfort him because he still believed that I loved him. He didn't understand the action, but he trusted me.

I think we're a lot like that in our relationship with God. When God allows things to happen that seem unjust, or painful, or don't make sense, we cry out because we don't understand. But we can trust that He is motivated by mercy and compassion, not cruelty and vindictiveness. **As we struggle with our understanding of God's fairness in how he works out his plan, it helps us to remember that God is motivated by mercy not simply by justice**; as I said earlier, when you look into your own life, aren't you glad of that?

Paul's second reason to trust God's fairness comes in verses 19-21. Anticipating that some might argue that in using people like Pharaoh and unbelieving Israel to further His purposes why should God judge them for resisting his will? In other words, if God has foreordained certain people to specific unfavorable roles in his plan, and no one can resist God's will, doesn't this make God into a puppet master merely pulling everyone's strings?

But again Paul rejects this conclusion, declaring that we are indeed responsible for our response to God, even though God is able to use both our obedience and our disobedience to fulfill His purposes.

When Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Who are you O mortal to talk back to God?" he's not discouraging us from wrestling with this issue. Instead, he's reminding us of the difference between being a creature and being the Creator. Which is one of the first lessons taught by Alcoholics Anonymous: "there is a God and you're not him."

Paul then quotes a saying from the prophet Isaiah about that which is formed by a craftsman questioning the purpose of its maker. The imagery here is of God as a master potter who's molding a piece of pottery for a specific purpose, using his skill to shape the pot for its task. This is the exact same imagery that's used in Genesis two where the Bible speaks of God as shaping the first man out of the dust of the ground and then breathing into him the breath of life

Just as the potter has the freedom to shape and mold his artistic craftsmanship into various kinds of pots, so God has the same right over the human race. The human race is a lump of clay, and God, as the potter, has the right to craft people and nations out of that one lump of clay and appoint these people and nations to various roles in the outworking of his strategy for the world.

So here in this metaphor of God being the potter and us being the clay we find a second reason we can trust God. We can trust God to be fair because HE IS OUR MAKER.

We can trust God's fairness, because as our Maker GOD CAN USE ANY AND EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE TO FURTHER HIS PLAN, a plan which has always been based on His unconditional love, unqualified mercy, and his ultimate goal of restoring fellowship with his lost creation .

When **Adam and Eve** stood there in shame, quaking in their guilt, awaiting the doom of God for their disobedience, what they received instead was forgiveness and the promise of restoration: *the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent*. And then they were put out of the garden—whether or not they understood why—because this was the necessary first step in bringing God's restoration to fruition.

So God used humanity's fall and can even use Israel's unbelief to fulfill his ultimate purpose for all creation living in harmony and fellowship with Him and with one another.

We find woven throughout these next three chapters (Romans 9-11) this tension between God's control over his creation and our freedom as creatures made by God to respond in responsible ways. This is why Christians who like to emphasize God's absolute power and control over people and events love this passage of scripture, and why Christians who emphasize human responsibility and freedom struggle with this chapter. But the reality is that in this chapter Paul affirms both God's control and human responsibility. Paul doesn't try to reconcile these two realities for us—maybe we wish he would have--but instead he simply accepts them both as true.

The nation of Israel having rejected Jesus Christ, God creates and grafts in the Christian Church for the next stage of the outworking of His salvation plan. God's plan isn't frustrated by Israel's unbelief, because he's able to use the Jewish rejection of Jesus to further his plan. Yet at the same time, the people of Israel were responsible and were held accountable by God for their rejection of Jesus. If God can use people who set themselves up in opposition to God to accomplish God's purposes, certainly we can trust Him to work in our lives and in our church to accomplish his purposes.

As God said through the prophet Hosea
'Those who were not my people I will call "my people",
and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved". '
'And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people",
there they shall be called children of the living God.' (Romans 9:25)

So in the next few weeks, as we follow the life of Jacob and his brother Esau, we will again see this mysterious interweaving of God's will and our choices—always moving His plan forward.

So the best answer we can get—and the one we should give to our children is:

**Life may not be fair, but God is good.
So you can trust Him to be working for your good,
both in this life and the next.**

Let's pray.