

But, What about the Jews? Romans 9:1-16

Here are some tough questions:

1. Is there another word for "synonym"?
2. What do you do when you see an endangered animal eating an endangered plant?
3. Would a fly without wings be called a walk?
4. What was the "best thing" before sliced bread?
5. If you try to fail, but succeed, which have you done?
6. Can God be trusted to keep His promises?

Tough questions; mostly silly, but of course the last one – Can God be trusted? – which is very serious and a question that we must deal with today. Because it is this question of God's trustworthiness, as we move from Romans chapter 8 to chapter 9, that has dramatically shifted Paul's tone in writing, away from being very joyous to now being very sad.

Remember from last week, that the end of Chapter 8 was Paul's glorious conclusion to his Gospel presentation: that our salvation can only be attained by faith in the redemption God graciously offers us through Christ's death in our behalf. And the reason that God would do this for us, is because He loves us! Even before we were ever born, God knew us and had planned for our inclusion in His eternal family. To which Paul concludes, *if God is for us, who is against us?* (8:31).

For those whom God foreknew
He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son ...
And those whom He predestined he also called;
and those whom He called he also justified;
and those whom He justified he also glorified.
Romans 8:29-30

After saying these things Paul then pens an exultation on how nothing in all of creation can separate those whom God has called from the love of God made available to them through Christ Jesus. I can almost see Paul back there in time doing a dance for joy as he promises us the faithfulness of God, who will *work in all circumstances to bring about good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose* (8:28).

But just then, one of the members of Paul's imaginary crowd of critics speaks up. Paul has already anticipated and answered some tough questions from this group, but this is the toughest question he must now answer. In response to Paul's declarations of God's love and concern for his children, the question is now raised, "*If God is so faithful and trustworthy towards those He loves and calls, then what happened to God's "Chosen People," the nation of Israel? Weren't they also predestined, called, and adopted by God? Wasn't God also "for Israel" and look what has happened to them through time: exile, dispersion, destruction of their nation and of their Temple.* **In other words what proof do we find in the history of Israel that God can be trusted to do as He has promised for those whom He has chosen?**

That question, that challenge, is what has now, in chapters 9-11, changed Paul's tone back to very serious and also very sad for his own people: To his invisible inquisitor, Paul replies, *I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh* (9:2).

So now, in the next three chapters Paul will again attempt to lead us through the humanly incomprehensible concept of how God can be considered just if He is the one who has predestined everything, including our obedience or disobedience; and whether or not we can truly trust Him to ultimately keep His promises towards those whom He has called.

How do we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose?
(Romans 8:28 made into a question)

By the end of chapter 11, Paul will have proved that the history of Israel's relationship with God and their current rejection of the Messiah actually serves as a perfect example of God working according to His own plan to bring about the most good for His chosen people; which all along He had intended to include members from both Israel and the Gentile nations. Paul would have us understand that it is the current Jewish unbelief which has finally prompted the long prophesied Gentile evangelism; and it is this "*reconciliation of the world*" that will one day provoke the Jews return for their own restoration (11:13-15). You see ... God does have a plan for everything and everyone!

But we are getting ahead of our story. For today it is enough just to understand the distinction between God's use of individuals as actors in history and His determinations for who is in His family. Be very sure to notice that, in chapter nine, Paul is no longer talking about individual salvation, but has shifted to considering how individuals might be chosen to participate in history. This is what Paul means by saying ...

It is not as though the word of God had failed.
For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,
and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants;
Romans 9:6

What Paul begins explaining in chapter nine, is God's predetermination that Israel as a nation would be used to bring about the historic events leading up to the Messiah's entrance into our world. That is what Paul is referring to when he lists out all the benefits Israel had previously received from God:

- Their adoption as a nation that God would use to bring to pass His plans for our world.
- The covenants and promises God made with them, the laws he gave to them, the style of worship He defined for them, shaping them into a unique people to carry God's message of reconciliation to the rest of the world.
- The Patriarchs – and their rich history of having a close relationship with God
- And the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the nations of the world through them with the advent of their Messiah.

But I repeat, it is important you notice that Paul is no longer talking about any individual's personal salvation or relationship with God, just the part that they were predetermined by God to play in moving history forward to the coming of the Messiah.

So let's take a moment to really understand what Paul just said.

As a nation Israel was adopted by God, for no other reason than as certain specific descendants of Abraham they were the ones chosen to bring to pass the promises that God first made to Abraham. But have you ever noticed – as Paul had just pointed out – that not all of Abraham's children were counted as his descendants.

Here is a trick question. How many children did Abraham have? (actually eight)

God had promised old and childless Abraham that if he would faithfully follow – which he did - that God would make his descendants more numerous than the sand on the seashore and God would bless all the nations of the world through those descendants. God had also told Abraham that those descendants would first live as slaves for four hundred years until God released them to become a great nation of their own. And God had said that He would accomplish all this through a single miracle child that Abraham

and Sarah, in their very old age, would conceive together. God even named that child-to-be Isaac (meaning laughter) because both Abraham and Sarah laughed in disbelief when God made this promise to them (Genesis 17:15-22).

As promised, Isaac was born and named. But not before Abraham had already tried to help God's promise along by conceiving an earlier child through Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maid. This act of impatience by Abraham would tear their family apart for many years until Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's son born by her, were driven from camp; but not before God promised Abraham – who loved his firstborn son – that this child would also grow into a mighty nation, just not THE nation God would use to fulfill His promise.

So Abraham and Sarah, just as God had promised, birthed and raised Isaac to adulthood. Then after Sarah had died, Abraham remarried and sired six more children, all of which at their maturity he would carefully send away, because Isaac was the only one whom God had chosen to sire the nation that God would one day work with. So while Abraham's seven other children would play occasional minor roles in Israel's history, only Isaac was counted as his descendant to carry God's promise forward.

Then in his turn, when Isaac married and sired a pair of twin sons: Esau and Jacob. Which as Paul explained, before they were even born or had done anything to distinguish themselves, God had already chosen that the younger of the twins, Jacob, would be the one to carry the promise forward. And you know the rest of the story.

Jacob, goes on to live a rather devious and rough life – in no ways deserving to be the promised founder of a nation (but neither does Esau by his life choices deserve to be so either). However it is Jacob who is being moved forward according to God's plan; he sires 12 sons and a daughter and eventually changes his name to Israel; with the boys fathering the various tribes that will one day make up the nation Israel. Then Israel's eleventh son, Joseph is the one chosen by God to go through a series of rough experiences which eventually puts him in a position of power to move the rest of his family down to Egypt beginning their 400 years of enslaved residency – just as God had promised Abraham that such would happen some 200 years earlier.

So [*God's plans for our life*]
depend not on human will or exertion,
but on God who shows mercy.
Romans 9:16

The whole point that Paul is attempting to make here in Romans 9, is that the life or merits of each person predestined by God to move Abraham's promised blessing of the world forward, had nothing to do with God's choice that they would be the one to do

Proof that none of God's choices are dependent on what we do – or who we were born as – only on what He out of His mercy has predetermined to do through us and for us.

God's choices have never been based on our choices. And when you think about that aren't you very glad. Because while we were yet - all of us - God's enemies that is when He chose to send His son into our world to save those whom God had earlier predetermined to call, justify, and one day glorify by conforming them to the image of his son.

In the next few weeks we will learn a lot more about God's predeterminations and His continued relationship with Israel; which concludes with their eventual restoration to their homeland and the fullness of God's blessings being returned to them, all because of the promises that God has made to their ancestors – promises which God can always be trusted to keep. To bring us back to the idea of being Abraham's descendants, open to all and only being determined through faith rather than lineage, let us close with a return to Romans chapter 4:

For this reason it [being Abraham's heir] depends on faith,
in order that the promise may rest on grace
and be guaranteed to all his descendants,
not only to the adherents of the law
but also to those who share the faith of Abraham
Romans 4:15-16

The good news for us today is that all those whom God will count as Abraham's children and heirs of the promise has nothing to do with genetic descent or lifestyle and everything to do with God's merciful choices, so even we Gentiles born some now some 4,000 years later can qualify as a child of Abraham – when we like him choose to follow God by faith.

Amen