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Letting God Be God Romans 9

We continue in our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. We took a leisurely 6-week stroll through chapter 8. For the next 3 weeks, we are going to pick up the pace.

Every few years we have done a church pictorial directory. I remember one year reading the list of instructions about when to arrive, what to wear, etc. One item in particular jumped out at me: Some poses may include clothing beneath the waist. I remember thinking, "I hope ALL poses include clothing beneath the waist." I'm sure what the brochure intended to say is that some poses would be full length so dress accordingly...a warning this man should have heeded! We understand that because we understand the context. But if someone were to read these words **without** context, you might to jump to some wrong conclusions.

The same is true for Romans 9. It is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible and you cannot understand it unless you read what's on either side of it. In chapter 8 Paul declares, "If God is for us, who can be against us." In chapter 10 he will say, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." And today, in between those two promises, Paul teaches us about the doctrine of election.

Do you remember how chapter 8 ended? "For I am sure, etc." NOTHING can separate us from God's love, right? *And yet* it appears that God's chosen people, the Jews, HAVE separated themselves from God's love by rejecting the messiah. Listen:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that 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 brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Do you hear Paul's heartache? Paul's people...the Jews...God's elect...whose own scriptures point to the coming of a savior ...have turned their backs on that Messiah, Jesus. In fact, some were complicit in his death. This raises a question. If the Jews ARE God's chosen people...those who are called by God, does that mean God's call is ineffective? Paul gives answer:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring...it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise....when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Yes, Paul says, much of Israel have turned their backs on God. But there is an Israel within Israel. Just because you are a descendant of Abraham does not make you a child of the promise. Years back, our daughter Rachel and a friend were standing in the lunch room. A boy approached them and asked, "Are you Christians?" Rachel's friend replied, "I'm not a Christian; I'm a Methodist!" At first, Rachel thought she was just confused. But the more she got to know this girl, the more she realized she was accurate. She WAS a Methodist, not a Christian. We have Presbyterians who are not Christians... who are more concerned about denomination than the savior. Paul says there are Jews who are Jewish in name only; but they are not children of the promise.

So ...how did some become children of the promise? Was it because of their works? Their obedience? NO. Verse 10: "...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Now before you jump to conclusions about "God hating Esau..." this is not to be taken literally. It is hyperbole to make a point. And we learn that from Jesus. Do you remember these words? "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." Jesus wasn't saying we literally must hate our own family. He was saying that no one and nothing could come before their love for him. It was an exaggeration to emphasize the choice.

In this text, Paul says that God chose Jacob instead of Esau to be a father of the Jewish nation. His choice had nothing to do with anything either of them had done. How could it? They weren't even born yet! God chose Jacob for his plan...because God chose Jacob. God gets to do that! Some might say, "It's not fair that God would choose one over the other." Well... keep reading; listen to the heart of God as it shines through.

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy...

What does this text say is the reason behind God's election? God's decision to save some? What is the dominant theme? Mercy! Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. v. 15: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy..." We might expect to hear something contrary in the next phrase like "...and I will show wrath on those whom I choose."? But no! He doubles down. "...and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." Mercy. Compassion. Do you realize that doctrine of election is always spoken of in positive terms? It is always spoken of as God gracious gift of mercy and compassion! Election often gets a bad rap. It portrays God as capricious or unfair or mean-spirited. But right here...in the heart of THE chapter on election...we discover God's motivation behind it all. His incredible, gracious mercy and compassion!

Still, many struggle with this idea. Why? Why is election so unsettling for some? Because it is entirely God-centric, isn't it? And WE don't like that. We want to have something to say about how things turn out. We want to have a part to play in our salvation. WE want to be the ones who decide whether or not we follow God.

But the central principle in this passage is the one we like least: The absolute sovereignty of God. A god with the supreme right to rule. A just and loving God who created all things and retains absolute authority over his creation...even though we resent and question and even sass him.

And Paul has an illustration for that. (clay). Paul says, "For those of you who are second-guessing God...who are standing in judgment over him..., who are trying to tell him how he ought to carry out his affairs...could I show you how silly that is? It's like a lump of clay telling the potter what to do. 'Hey...it feels like you're trying to make me into a cup. I don't want to be a cup. I want to be a plate. Hey...what are you doing! You have no right! Stop that! It's not fair!'"

Paul says that when we try to tell our holy, righteous, powerful God what he ought to be doing...what is fair and not fair... when we try to boss God around, it is this ridiculous.

This chapter is an enigma. We discover here a God who is merciful...who wants to save... who calls a people into relationship with him. Yet...at the same time...a God who is God. Who has the right to call whom he will; to save whom he will. A God who does not have to answer to any human being for his decisions...whether we are comfortable with them or not. Whether we think they are fair or not. He is God!

I remember when Rachel was two years old...a very strong-willed toddler. One day she was walking away from me and I said, "Rachel, stop. Come back." She paused... dropped her head...and did the Tim Conway shuffle...and just kept inching away. I walked over in front of her, squatted down, grabbed her by the arms and said, "When daddy tells you to come, you come. Do you understand?" She looked into my eyes and said, "Duck's sleeping." That's the first time I'd ever encountered that response. It wasn't the last. It showed up in mutations. "Goat's sleeping. Horsie's sleeping." What I came to discover it meant was, "I'm uncomfortable because you are telling me what to do...so I am going to divert your attention by changing the subject."

That is a favorite ploy among adult humans as well. We don't like our heavenly father telling us what to do. We don't want to come when we are called. We don't like that fact that God is God and we are not. We want to be God. Isn't that at the presenting problem in Romans 1? Idolatry. We exchange the true God for false gods of our own making. We want to call the shots. Be in charge. And when the real God calls us back; urges us to change direction; tells us to modify our behavior; we drop our head...and shuffle...and stutter...try to change the subject.

We want to be our own gods. But we are, in fact, creations. And every time we try to be our own gods, we botch up life...and we botch up the world. We've been doing it since the beginning of time. The Holocaust. The Killing Fields. Slavery. Isis. We make lousy gods.

The true God has honored and dignified us through Jesus. He called us to be his children. He invited us into relationship with him. These are the dominant truths of the gospel. But we are still creatures. God is God. He is sovereign. He is above all and through all and in all. Above Him there is no other. We approach Him, not because we have the right to, but because he invites us to. We talk to him, not because we are equals, but because he starts conversation. We call him father, not because we are loving, dutiful children, but because through our brother Jesus we have been adopted.

And ...here's the punchline...we are saved, NOT because we made a decision for God...but because God made a decision for us. Many American Christians worship at the altar of Decisionism. We want to think we are saved because WE decided to be saved...which of course, puts our salvation back in our own hands. Let me ask this: to whom would you rather entrust your salvation. You? Or God? Paul's teaching is that we are saved...because God has chosen...irrevocably... to save us.

Now...if you have been raised in American evangelicalism...this might be new for you. We have been raised to believe the words of that old hymn: "I have decided to follow Jesus." It is MY decision. We Americans WANT to be the captains of our own fate, but Paul says, "Listen, God decided for you long

before you decided for him." And just in case you don't like Paul...you find him a little grouchy... how about Jesus? Three times in John 6 alone, Jesus says, "No one comes to me unless the Father draws him."

So...what do we do with this? What is the proper response to God's election? Spiritual arrogance...we're in the club and you aren't? Spiritual laziness? If I'm among the elect, it doesn't matter how I live, right? Or maybe Spiritual anxiety? How do I KNOW if God has saved me? Well...there are really only three proper responses: gratitude, humility and assurance. First, gratitude! When it suddenly strikes you, "Oh my! Out of the billions of human beings that have ever lived...God chose me??"... how can you respond with anything but gratitude? What other response is appropriate except, "Thank you Jesus for seeking me in my desperation and saving me!" Gratitude.

A second response is humility. When you realize God chose to save you... for no reason other than that he wanted to...that it had NOTHING to do with you or your goodness or deservedness... that is a very humbling thing. The problem is, the primary tenets of American Religion are these: we are all good people...and everybody goes to heaven. I have never been to a funeral where someone got up and said of the deceased, "You know, he was a pretty awful guy. He's probably in hell...and he deserves it." No, in American Religion, everybody is good... everybody goes to heaven.

But that's NOT what the Bible teaches. When we read the Bible, from beginning to end, we see how hopelessly broken we are. We are NOT good; our inclinations are NOT holy; our instincts are NOT pure. We deserve judgment. Despite this, God in his grace chooses to save. How can we respond with anything but humility?

And the third response to election is assurance! Or, as John Calvin put it, "freedom from fear." If my salvation is my responsibility...if it depends upon my confession of faith and my obedience... how do I know it's secure? If I GAINED salvation by my own actions, can't I just as surely LOSE my salvation by my own actions? But the doctrine of election says that since God is doing the saving and not me...my salvation is secure. Put a different way, if the all-powerful God has decided to save me...what's going to stop him? Or, as Paul pointed out last week, "If God is for us...who can be against us!"

Now, you might reply, how do I KNOW that God is for me? How do I KNOW if I'm saved?" Well...there **is** a way to be certain without a shadow of a doubt. Would you like to know what it is? It's cheating because we are jumping to chapter 10...but I want you to have this assurance. Here it is: Romans 10:9-10 "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, YOU WILL BE SAVED!" That's an ironclad promise!

If that is true for you...if you have offered a true confession that Jesus is Lord of your life... if you believe in your heart that his resurrection from the dead has taken away your sin...the promise...the absolute promise of God is... "You will be saved!"

31 years ago I fell in love with Cyndi before she fell in love with me. And I dropped that bomb on her way too soon. It scared her to death and she ran away. But a few months later, she called me back. I have never been happier to be chosen by someone in my life. The doctrine of Election is a gift for believers...the wonderful discovery that God loves you...has known you before the world was formed... and chose... you. How wonderful is that? "If God is for you...who can be against you!"