

Lectionary 18A
Romans 9:1-18

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I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—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. 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 them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

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; but "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son." Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac. Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call) she was told, "The elder shall serve the younger." As it is written, "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau."

What then are we to say? 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 it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

Like a drummer pounding out a persistent rhythm that is the foundation of a musical piece, Paul has been pounding out the theme of this letter to the Christian community at Rome. He uses a variety of terms to state the theme, but it is the same theme over and over and over: God is righteous. God is faithful to the promises he has made to his people. God is faithful to the goal or destiny he has for his creation. God's love is unfailing. God's grace is all-encompassing. Paul sums up the theme of the letter in the final verse of chapter 8 – "nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

But as happens whenever one pushes a truth to its logical conclusion, making things black and white, either/or, there are questions that lurk in the background. Paul is well aware of this and now turns his attention to a reality that is personally painful for him. Many, if not most, of his people – the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; the “chosen” people; the people of the covenant; his brothers and sisters in the faith of Israel – many, if not most, of his people do not recognize that God has established a new basis for righteousness in Jesus. They reject the claim that Jesus is the messiah. Jesus was a Jew. The original disciples were Jews. Paul is a Jew. Paul firmly believes that the death and resurrection of Jesus marks the redemption of all creation, all people – but first and foremost it is the redemption of God’s chosen people, the fulfillment of God’s promises that go all the way back Abraham.

Is not God’s plan for the redemption of all creation through Christ foiled by their rejection of that plan? How can God’s redemption of all creation be complete without the people of Israel? Can Paul’s confident declaration of the surety of God’s grace be anything more than whistling in the dark in the face of this persistent rejection of that very grace? How much comfort is there in being told that “nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love” when there is apparently something quite capable of separating the chosen people from God’s love?

Obviously, these are complex questions, and Paul struggles with them for three chapters – 9, 10, & 11. We will be reading portions of these chapters over three Sundays, so we don’t get the full scope of Paul’s response today, but we’ll get a start.

The problem of the rejection of God’s plan for redemption through Jesus Christ is not simply a question of what is to happen to Israel, the chosen people. There is a deeper issue here. The core issue that Paul has to address is the reliability of God’s word and the ability to bring God’s plans to fruition. God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had made promises to Moses and David. Through prophets like Isaiah God had made promises to the people of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon. While sitting in exile and despairing of ever returning to the land of their ancestors, the people heard these words of assurance from Isaiah:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*
(Isaiah 55:10-11)

In other words, God always keeps his promises. You can count on it.

But if the blessing God promised to Abraham and his descendants -- a blessing Paul knows to have been fulfilled in Christ (Romans 4:11-12) – if that blessing is rejected by those descendants, then God’s redemptive word has been defeated. And if God’s word can be defeated by Israel’s rejection, then what assurance can anyone have of God’s redemptive word? How can we know that God’s redemptive word, spoken in Christ, may not also eventually fail for us? How can we be sure that the promise God makes to us in baptism is trustworthy? That is what is at stake here – can God be trusted to keep his promises or not?

Paul begins by restating truths he had touched on earlier in the letter. First, he affirms that the descendants of Abraham truly are the “chosen people” and they enjoy several gifts from God – the covenants, the law, the worship, adoption as heirs or children of God, and even Jesus himself, the messiah. These were given to the descendants of Abraham, not just for their own benefit, but so that all nations of the earth might be blessed through them. (Genesis 12:3)

Paul next restates another truth he had stated earlier (2:28-29) – that the existence of a true Israel is not a matter of biological descent, but a matter of the continuing gracious election of God. Being a member of the chosen people is not a matter of genetics or parentage, but a matter of God’s gracious promise.

When the lectionary had us begin this series of readings in June, it didn’t really dawn on me how fitting it was going to be to be reading the Genesis stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah and Rachel together with Paul’s letter to the Romans, but it turns out that one can’t fully understand Paul’s line of reasoning in Romans without knowing the stories of Genesis. Paul uses these very stories to make a point about election, about being the chosen people, so it is good that we have been reading them together.

Paul notes that Abraham had two sons – Ishmael and Isaac – but the election did not go through both of them. Just Isaac was the “child of the promise”. The same is true of Isaac and Rebekah’s sons. Esau and Jacob were twins and shared an equal biological heritage. If election were a matter of physical descent, it should have been through Esau, the elder son. But by God’s choice, the election went through Jacob. Paul’s meaning is clear, and Martin Luther paraphrases him this way: “It follows irrefutably: one does not become a [child] of God and an heir of the promise by descent but by the gracious election of God.” (*Lectures on Romans*)

That is the point Paul is making – God’s purpose of blessing all humanity through an elect people cannot be derailed when some of those who are biologically part of that people reject that purpose. The destiny of the chosen people is a matter of God’s election, and God’s power is such that no human failure, no matter how great, can derail God’s redemptive plan.

Paul’s despair at the unbelief of his fellow descendants of Israel is overcome by the conviction that God cannot be defeated and his promises are sure. God remains in control of his plan, guiding it to the goal he has set for it, regardless of what our response may be. For that reason, Paul sees a continuity between the people of Israel and the church, the followers of Christ, for both exist only by God’s gracious choice.

This whole concept of God’s choice, or election, gives rise to several questions. To make a choice would seem to require a simultaneous rejection of other options. If I choose to order a hamburger, that means I choose not to order a hot dog. If I choose to paint my house blue, that means I reject painting it pink. When God selected Abraham and his descendants to be the chosen people, God rejected others from being the chosen people. When God chose for the election to go through Isaac and Jacob, that means the election did not go through Ishmael and Esau.

Over the course of history, this passage in chapter 9 has been appealed to in supporting the concept of “double predestination” – that God has predetermined that some people will be saved and that others will not be saved. This is a complete misreading of what Paul is saying. Paul is not speaking of the fate of individuals in this passage, but only with the place of Israel in God’s plan of salvation. He is making a statement about how God has dealt with Israel, and continues to deal with it, even when it rejects his Son – namely, he deals with Israel in mercy, even when it deserves wrath. It is important to notice that Paul does not speak of the symmetry of God’s grace and wrath – some are saved and some are damned – but rather speaks of the asymmetry of God’s grace – “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” (v. 15) Everywhere in this letter, grace holds the upper hand: grace comes to those who do not deserve it (3:22-24; 5:8-10), grace is more abundant than sin (5:20-21) and breaks its power (6:22, 7:6), and there is nothing anywhere that can thwart God’s love and grace (8:38-39). [Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, p.163]

Paul is certainly aware of the possibility that we, as rebellious creatures, may reject that offer of mercy, and in doing so run the risk that God will honor our choice. But nowhere does Paul hint that such a rejection is willed by God, let alone predetermined. If that were the case, then preaching the gospel would be a sham and the proclamation of God’s gracious act in Jesus would be a delusion.

Paul steadfastly maintains that the purpose of God is grace and redemption for all people. He proclaims that the same gracious purpose at work in the election of Israel is now at work in a new chosen people to whom you and I can now also belong by that same gracious purpose of God. The point of this passage in chapter 9 is not about the narrow and predetermined fate of each individual, but about the enlargement of God’s mercy to include gentiles. We gentiles can now be part of his gracious purpose, we can be part of his people, chosen by grace through Jesus Christ.

Paul has more to say about the descendants of Abraham in chapters 10 and 11, but you’re going to have to come back next week for that.