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Romans 9:6-13

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Not very long ago I found myself in a discussion with a woman who had left the church and become an atheist. “If God exists,” she told me, “he’s either a failure or he’s a liar and I can’t worship either of those.” She saw pain and suffering in the world—and I think she’d experienced a fair bit of pain and suffering herself—and had concluded that if there is a God in control of things, he’s completely unworthy of her faith and worship. She had been raised in a Pentecostal background and had been steeped in the false “Prosperity Gospel”. She’d been taught that God’s will for everyone is health and wealth. But she was neither wealthy nor particularly healthy. She said that people gave prophecies weekly about deliverance and material blessings and she listened to the TV preachers and read the books that laid out their Bible prophecy schemes in light of current events and said that Jesus is coming back tomorrow to make good on God’s promises. And none of that happened. She finally just gave up. As she told me this it became clear that she had been taught a version of the Biblical story that was human-centred rather than God-centred. The result—as it is for many people—was that when she experienced problems of her own and saw pain and suffering in the world around her, she blamed it all on God. But that’s not the story as the Bible tells it. Looking at the world her way, blaming God for pain and suffering and evil, is like a drunk stumbling off the sidewalk into traffic and blaming it on the people who built the sidewalk. The Bible’s story is a story of the righteousness, the faithfulness of God. The pain and the sorrow in the world are the result of

our failures, *our* sin, *our* selfishness, *our* refusal to trust in the goodness of God. And the Bible’s story tells us that, despite *our* sin and *our* idolatry, God, in his righteousness, has come in Jesus, to give his life to set right the mess we’ve made.

In Romans 9 and 10, Paul takes us back to the beginning and retells the story—in this case the story of Israel. Because, as he wrote in last week’s passage, Israel’s rejection of the Messiah posed a problem. Like friends following you in their car, who miss the right turnoff and drive off in the wrong direction, the Messiah has come to Israel, but Israel has rejected him. Despite his warnings of coming judgement and destruction should Israel not repent and change her ways, Israel continued speeding happily down the road to judgement. And for his people, Paul said he is deeply sorrowful and in continual anguish. But why has this happened? And how has it happened? Those are the big questions. And the even bigger question that hangs over them is this question of God’s righteousness. The great theme of Paul’s letter to the Romans is this idea that the good news about Jesus the Messiah reveals the righteousness of God. Jesus himself is a dramatic revelation of God’s covenant faithfulness—the proof that God does what he says he will do. But then what about Israel, his people to whom he made all those promises long ago? If Israel is careening off to judgement and destruction, is God *really* righteous?

Paul’s resounding answer is *Yes!* The reason it may look as though God has been unfaithful is that people have misinterpreted or misunderstood the story of Israel. This is why Paul takes us back to the beginning—back to Abraham—and walks us through it, explaining it along the way. Paul does this very carefully. This was an argument he had made many, many, many times with his fellow Jews. It was the very story that he had to work through himself in those days after Jesus met him on the Damascus Road,

as he sat in the house of Judas for three days, completely blind and waiting for Ananias. Paul knew the story of his own people. But the revelation that this Jesus, who was crucified and was alive, truly was Israel’s Messiah—well—that forced Paul to rethink the entire story. Not just that, it forced him to rethink everything he thought he understood about that story. Suddenly Jesus was at the centre of it and that changed *everything*.

Paul wasn’t the only person in those days rethinking Israel’s story. What Paul does here had been done before, although not in the same way. During roughly the two centuries that stand on either side of Jesus’ birth, there was a sense amongst the Jews that their story had become stuck—not unlike the woman who told me she had given up because what she had been told should have happened hadn’t happened. The Lord had made promises to Israel, going all the way back to Abraham—promises that had to do with Israel’s place in the world and her place before him. When Israel was in exile, God had made more promises about the days when she would be delivered from that exile and return home. Israel did return home from exile, but things were never the same. For a while, when the Maccabees revolted, it looked like the Messianic age might finally be coming, but the Romans put an end to that. The Jews lived in hope. They—or at least most of them—believed that the Lord is righteous, that he fulfils his covenant promises, but it seemed like the story had stalled out and was going nowhere fast. The author of the apocryphal book of 4 Ezra struggles with this idea of the Lord’s faithfulness in light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. In Chapters 10-19 of the Wisdom of Solomon, the writer—much as Paul does here in Romans—goes back to the story of the Exodus and retells Israel’s history and stresses the unknowable sovereign ways of God. He likens God to a potter moulding clay, this vessel for that use, this vessel for another, and

while his purpose may seem inscrutable to us, he really does know what he is doing. Wisdom was written to encourage Jews of Paul's time: trust in the God who rescued your people from Egypt; he will act again to rescue you from the Egyptians and Pharaohs of the present day. In the Qumran Scrolls—the Dead Sea Scrolls—one passage looks back to the Lord's promises in Deuteronomy 29-30 and reinterprets them in light of the people of the Qumran community. They saw themselves as the faithful Israelites, while the rest of Israel was heading off to judgement.

Paul does the same sort of thing here. He retells the story of Israel in order to tell us again: this is how God acts and this is our place in the story. And Paul also stresses: The story may seem like it's stalled out, or it may seem like it's going in the wrong direction, but it really is headed somewhere, there really is a point to it, God is good and faithful and knows what he's doing. And, just as important, Paul puts his readers right in the story, saying, "You are here." Remember what Paul has stressed all through the letter so far: God is righteous. God is faithful. Everything he's said so far depends on God's faithfulness to his promises.

So what is Paul's answer to the unfaithfulness of his people? What does he find as he goes back to the story of Israel, back to the beginning? Well, what he finds there is that from the get-go, from the very beginning, God has chosen to work out his purposes for the world by choosing or by electing, not just one single family from amongst the whole human race, but by continuing to choose *from within that family*. God's election didn't end with Abraham. Look at Romans 9:6.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed.

First, Paul addresses the big question here: Has God's word failed? Is

Israel's failure to believe evidence that God has been untrue to his promises? And, for Paul, the answer was an obvious "No". God is faithful. Jesus is the ultimate proof of that. What we need to do is read the story of God's people with Jesus at the centre. That was what Israel had failed to do. As he writes that God's word has not failed, Paul takes us back to Isaiah. Through the prophet, the Lord had said:

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 shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)

It can't be stressed often enough: *God does what he says he will do and his word never returns void*. But there's probably another reason that Paul draws on Isaiah and that's that Isaiah tells the story of God's servant people being winnowed down further and further until that people reaches a single person through whom God will finally fulfil his promises and bring redemption to the whole Cosmos. Isaiah saw God's righteousness, his faithfulness finally revealed once and for all in that *single* servant. Keep that in mind as Paul tells Israel's story. He goes on:

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring... (Romans 9:6b-7a)

So Paul's first point is that not everyone of Israel is truly Israel. There's "Israel" and then there's "Israel". Think of the way Paul talked, back in 7:21-25, about an I who delights in the law and another I who is captive to sin. On the one hand there's the "flesh" and on the other there's the purpose of God and the two

are set against each other. From this point on, Paul can talk about two different "Israels" just as, back in Chapter 2, he talked about two different kinds of "Jews"—the Jew who is circumcised externally and the Jew who is circumcised in his heart. That also means, Paul has already established that the second Israel is not necessarily a sub-group within the first Israel. Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer distinguishes these as ethnic Israel and "the Israel of faith",¹ which can be a helpful way to look at it, but Paul's point is that the Israel of faith isn't limited to people who are also ethnic Jews or the biological children of Abraham. Not all those descended from Abraham according to the flesh belong to this second Israel, this Israel of faith. Some of them do, but there are others who are united to Abraham, not by their genes, but by their faith.

Verse 7 is a little difficult to translate because the wording is very spare. I think the ESV, in the end, makes the right point, but gets the translation backwards. It has Paul writing that not all of Israel are children of Abraham as a result of being his offspring. The Greek word Paul uses is the word *sperma*, which means "seed". The ESV actually seems to miss Paul's own explanation in the rest of verse 7. He writes:

...but "Through Isaac shall your offspring (again, *sperma* or "seed") be named."

Abraham has many children, but for Paul it's this group of Abraham's children, this "seed"—the ones the ESV somewhat misleadingly calls "offspring"—through whom God is working out his redemptive purposes. The "*seed* of Abraham" are the "chosen" or "elect" ones.

Now, at first glance, most Jews who heard Paul say this would have balked. But Paul backs this point up with

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Doubleday: Garden City, N.Y., 1964), page 560.

Israel's own story. Look at verses 8 and 9:

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 [seed]. For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son."

So the Lord made a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation through whom the world would be blessed. And Paul now points to Abraham's two sons as the first piece of evidence that not all who are Israel are really Israel—or, at any rate, to make his point that God, in his choosing or election, has always been winnowing down Abraham's family. Abraham had *two* sons, but only *one* of them was the child of promise. God did not choose to work his redemptive purposes out through both Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac was the son who was counted as Abraham's "seed".

Paul's essential point here is that God had promised Abraham a great family and that he has done what he promised. God's promise, his *word*, did not fail as result of the exclusion of Ishmael.

Now, this would have been completely uncontroversial for anyone listening to Paul. But someone was bound to see where Paul was headed and object. "But," he might say, "Isaac, not Ishmael, was the son born miraculously of Sarah when she was a hundred years old. God never promised Ishmael, but he did promise Isaac." Someone else might have argued that Ishmael was unfaithful and impious and thus was unworthy of fulfilling God's purposes. Of course, Paul's already dealt with that. The rabbis had come to teach that Abraham—and the other patriarchs—had been deserving of God's call, because Abraham had some kind of previous knowledge of the *torah* and

was already keeping it. Paul has already pointed out that this is nonsense, but he hits at this point again.

In verse 10 he takes on this idea about Ishmael having the wrong mother.

And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac...

Paul points to the *next* generation. Isaac had two sons, just as Abraham did. And again, God winnowed down the second generation. He winnowed out Abraham's son, Ishmael and he also winnowed out Jacob's son, Esau. But Esau wasn't winnowed out because he was born of the wrong mother. Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau, were both born of Rebekah. In fact, they were twins. But only Jacob was chosen. Not only that, but Jacob was the younger son. But—wait!—there's more:

...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."
(Romans 9:11-12)

God's election had nothing to do with parentage. And here Paul stresses it has nothing to do with whether or not the chosen one was worthy. Again, this strikes at the rabbinic idea that Abraham deserved to be chosen because of his righteousness. Some argued similarly that Esau was rejected because he despised his inheritance while Jacob was eager for it. But Paul points out that God's promise about the older serving the younger was made before they were even born and long before either had had a chance to prove himself either worthy or unworthy. Paul could have pointed out, too, that even though Jacob valued his inheritance, at the time it fell to him, he was a cheating

and lying good-for-nothing. Jacob didn't earn his chosen place any more than Isaac did. And Paul's point is to stress that *God works out his purposes on the principle of grace*. As he writes in verse 12, it's "not because of works, but because of him who calls".

This points to where Paul is headed in 11:6. There he's going to stress the point that this real or true or faithful Israel that remains is not simply a small group of ethnic Jews who have escaped judgement because of their obedience to *torah*. That's how the Jews at Qumran thought of themselves. No, the remnant of believing Jews are those who have come by faith, who have, like Paul, as he writes in Galatians, "through the law, died to the law that I might live to God" (Galatians 2:19). Again, it's all about grace. Those who are the real or true or faithful Israel can never lord it over those who are not, as if they've earned their status. To drive this point home, in verse 13, Paul quotes from Malachi 1:2-3.

As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What do we do with that? This is one of those prickles Bp. Wright said Chapters 9-11 are full of. I've heard a lot of attempts to explain this, some good and some bad. The key is context. Remember: Context is everything. If we go back and look at the larger context in Malachi it all makes perfect sense. In the first few verses of the book of Malachi, the Lord speaks of the destruction of Edom—that's the nation descended from Esau—and he stresses how judgement came on them for their wickedness. People would see Edom thrown down and declare, "Great is the Lord!" But this is one short paragraph at the beginning of four chapters. The rest of the book of Malachi is God's complaint against Israel—Jacob's descendants—for their own wickedness. Israel may have

been tempted to gloat and feel superior when Edom was thrown down, but Malachi makes it clear that Israel has her own sins and that she ought to recognize the grace the Lord has shown her in being patient with her sins, delaying judgement, giving her warning and a chance to repent. God's love, God's grace, God's election are never merited.

Now, lest we lose sight of the forest for the trees, remember that Paul's point in retelling Israel's story is that that God's word has not failed. Some might despair that most in Israel rejected the Messiah and have chosen to continue their march to destruction, but Paul is reminding us here—using these events from Israel's past—that God has *always* worked this way. He declared that he would work through Isaac and not Ishmael, through Jacob and not Esau. And hanging over it all we have Isaiah's prophecy in which the whole people of Israel, in order for God to work out his redemptive plan, was eventually winnowed down to one man. If the story doesn't make sense, we need to look at it again. The story needs to be told with Jesus at the centre and that's what Paul is doing.

Despite all of this, these aren't easy verses to read. Our cultural heritage as post-Enlightenment, Western people has ingrained in us strong ideas about individual liberty and autonomy and freedom. We're often uncomfortable with the idea that anyone can tell us what to do and here Paul's giving us a vivid picture of God's sovereignty that involves the calling and destiny of nations and people. Many people steeped in our secular culture have trouble even grasping how this sort of God can be considered "good", because we've so corrupted the meaning of good. Today and for many people "good" means being left to choose for ourselves—despite the fact that our choices consistently make a mess of our world our lives. But even many Christians who understand that God is

loving, wise, and good quickly reject the idea of God's sovereignty when it comes to this idea of election. We read what Paul says here and we admit that, yes, Paul has shown that God truly is faithful to his promises. But to many of us it seems that in the process Paul has given us a picture of God as one who unjustly plays favourites. Paul realised this and will address it in the next verse. But in the meantime, Brothers and Sisters, we need to remember to look at the story, to look at history, to look at the world around us with Jesus the Messiah at its centre. Dear Friends, when we put Jesus where he belongs, it changes everything, just as it did for Paul. Jesus—the King who gave his life as a sacrifice for the sins of his people—is the supreme evidence and the ultimate proof of God's goodness and faithfulness. Even as we find God's sovereign ways puzzling and inscrutable, we can look to Jesus and know that God is good, that God is wise, that God does what he says he will do. We can look to Jesus and know that God will—as he promised—give us life and set his Creation to rights. And we can be sure of this, because in Jesus—the Incarnate Word of God—it has already begun.

Let us pray: Gracious and sovereign Father, you know that we struggle to trust in your goodness and wisdom. Like Eve, we try to know and to choose the good ourselves, despite our limited knowledge, our limited vision, and our limited wisdom. Teach us again to trust in you. Put Jesus and his cross always before our eyes, that we might be ever-assured by him and by his sacrifice that you are good, that you are wise, and that you are faithful. In Jesus, teach us to live in faith in the midst of pain and suffering, that we might live as witnesses to your righteousness revealed in him. Amen.