

Romans
Divine Election (Part 2)
Romans 9:6-29
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Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas

Romans 9, this passage, in Romans 9, is about divine election. Now even as we begin it, I need to tell you that this is a topic that is not a popular topic in much of today's church. In fact, it has become increasingly popular for conferences and sermon series to attack God's sovereignty in salvation.

A few years ago, some of you may remember, there was a conference in Atlanta called The John 3:16 Conference, a passage, by the way, that we wholeheartedly embrace and I preach, but the implication was those who believe in God's sovereignty in salvation must not believe in John 3:16, and those things were attacked. The former president of a local seminary here in our area was, for a number of years, openly critical of Calvinism and God's sovereignty, the doctrines of grace.

Recently, the pastor of a large charismatic church in our area preached a series against these truths. In one message that pastor said this about election, "I just don't believe that about God. I don't believe God chose some." He essentially denied that the Bible teaches election at all. Well, it's a little hard to do that when you're preaching expositionally through Romans and you come to Romans 9, where we come today.

Now as we come to this passage, let me just say this, these are difficult truths. They are difficult truths because they seem to cross our concept of fairness. They're difficult truths, in some cases, to understand. They're difficult truths to reconcile with other things that we know the Scriptures teach. So let's just admit that, and we're going to work through those issues, but I understand that.

But nevertheless, we have to come, as we always have to come to every passage, to this passage in humility. We have to let God say what He says. As John Calvin himself said, not about this passage, but just generally, "It is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say." We have no right to make the Bible say what we think it ought to say. Instead, we are all here to try to determine what it says, what God has said.

Now, let me just say that when it comes to this topic, I think there are three groups here this morning, and you can determine which group you fall in. I think, perhaps you are here this morning and you are essentially uninformed about this doctrine of election. You don't really know much about it, you've heard a little bit and you may be curious, maybe not, but you really don't have a lot of background. It's my prayer that as this passage unfolds you will be profoundly enriched over the next few weeks and that many of your questions about this truth will be answered, and that you will find it to be a source of encouragement in the days ahead.

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A second group, perhaps for you election is already a treasured friend, a treasured truth. Well I hope that as we dig a little deeper in this magnificent chapter, that together we will come to grasp this doctrine in a deeper and richer and more profound way. Or perhaps you're in the third group, as I once was. Perhaps you have been taught and have believed that sovereign election is in somehow a slur on, an attack on, the gracious character of God and it ought to be something that is rejected out of hand.

You know when we come to this issue, the real question is this, what does the Bible say, what does the Bible say? So all I ask you this morning is to check what I say against the Scripture. We're all to be Bereans, you ought to be skeptical of what you hear, you ought to be like the Bereans who check it against the Scripture to see whether or not it's so. I invite you to do that. If what I say isn't in the text of Romans 9, or the other passages that we'll look at together, then of course, don't believe it, reject it. On the other hand, if what we discover is clearly and obviously there, then I plead with you to be open, to change your mind and heart to God's mind and heart on the issue.

Now let me say that if you're in that third group, I understand your perspective because I personally have not always liked, I have not always understood, and I've not always believed the doctrine of sovereign election; that was not the setting in which I grew up. In fact, I grew up, my dad was a music director, and many of the churches where he led music were Southern Baptist churches, where as far as I can remember I never heard the word election, except in reference to the US election.

Then I went to a Christian college where such issues were, frankly, downplayed by most as potentially divisive. But I had a few instructors, including my father-in-law who is now with the Lord, who began to expose me to what the Bible actually teaches. This was always his question, what does the Bible say? I began, as I got to seminary, to read some of the greatest writers in the history of the church, I began to read and study on my own, and eventually I came to the position that I will teach you today and in the weeks to come. It is what I believe the Scripture clearly teaches, and I invite you to go on this journey with me. So, let me just encourage you to let go of your fears, to let go of your predispositions, and let the Bible say what it says. Let God be God.

Now, as Paul sets out, just to remind you of the context, as Paul sets out to explain why so many who belong to Israel, God's chosen people in the Old Testament, had not, in fact, come to believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah, they had not come to believe in His gospel, Paul tries to answer that question. Why? Why have so few believed in the Christian gospel? If this is the fulfillment of Old Testament truth, then why have God's chosen people, by and large, not embraced it?

Paul's first answer to that question comes in verses 6 to 29 of Romans 9, and the answer is because of the reality of divine election. Now last week we just started to examine this

paragraph. It begins as I noted, in verses 6 to 13, with what I called, Divine Election: Explained and Illustrated, Divine Election: Explained and Illustrated. You see, the simple historical fact that not all the physical descendants of Abraham have believed, that is consistent with both what the Scripture teaches and with God's plan of redemption, because belonging to God's true spiritual people has never been based on ethnic identity. It has always been based on God's gracious and sovereign choice. And Paul sets out to prove that to us, and he proves it through the Scripture. In fact, in this entire paragraph, Paul will quote no fewer than ten passages from the Old Testament Scriptures, the Hebrew Scripture, to show us this is, in fact, what it teaches. It teaches, he will argue, that God has chosen only some Jews for salvation, and it teaches that God has chosen some Gentiles for salvation as well.

Now in verse 6, as we noted last time, Paul lays down a foundational explanation that really serves as the basis for the rest of his argument, a foundational explanation. Notice verse 6, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." He's saying, when you think about how few Jewish people have believed the gospel I preached, Paul was Jewish and he says, when you think about how few of them have believed the gospel, it is not as though God's Old Testament promises to Israel have in some way failed. And then he explains why he would say that. Why haven't they failed? Why do you say that Paul? Verse 6 goes on to say, "For," because, here's the reason, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel."

Now I'm not going to go through this in detail like I did last time, but just to remind you of the broad sweep, Paul here in verse 6 introduces us to three different groups. First of all, there are all the physical descendants of Abraham who are God's chosen people as a nation. So you have group one is all the physical descendants. Now out of that group, he identifies two unique spiritual groups within the physical descendants of Israel. First of all, there are those we could term unbelieving Israel. This would be those who have Abraham for their physical father, but not their spiritual father. They don't believe like Abraham believed. They're not justified like he was justified.

And then the second spiritual group, in that large group of physical descendants, is true spiritual Israel. These are the spiritual descendants of Abraham who do believe like he believed, who do have faith in God and His promises as he believed, who came to justification by faith in the same way that he did. And Paul's point here is to say that God's promises in the Old Testament were addressed to them, to true spiritual Israel, and those promises have not and never will fail. Of course, there were promises made to the physical descendants of Abraham, we'll talk about that even when we get to chapter 11, but he's talking here about those spiritual promises, the promises of a Messiah, of salvation, as he tries to wrestle with why so few Jewish people have come to embrace Christ and His gospel.

Now this morning, Paul begins in earnest then, having laid that sort of foundational explanation, he begins in earnest to explain election, and he does so through three biblical illustrations, three

biblical illustrations, and they're found in verses 7 to 13. Let me just read this section of this longer paragraph to you. Let me begin in verse 6, you follow along.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but, "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." That is, it's not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is the word of promise, "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON." And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

Now those three biblical illustrations, by the time we're done with them, will leave absolutely no doubt about the reality of divine sovereign election, and they will also answer some questions about the nature of election as well. But before we consider what those illustrations have to teach us, as we often do, I want to step back, and I first want to sort of level the playing field. I want to clear the foundation of the mess and respond to several mistaken ideas about election, several mistaken ideas that people come to this text and others on this topic with. So let me just make sure that you're not carrying one of these with you.

Here's mistaken idea number one, election is not taught in the Bible at all. It's simply not taught. That was the view of the pastor, the local pastor here when he got to this issue, just not there. When I was growing up, this was the perspective of some of the churches that I attended. Now let me just say that this is, and I say this as kindly as I can, but this is simply not an honest position. You cannot hold this position and be straightforward with the Scripture because as we will see, election is taught. We can argue about the nature of election, we can argue about how God chooses, we can argue about a lot of things, but we can't argue about whether or not the Bible teaches election. It is clear, as you will see. So this is not an honest position. So let me just say, if that's been your position, I hope you will come to a different one before we're done. Because, as you will see, there are way too many passages that address this issue to simply ignore them.

I mean, just look here at Romans 9, look at verse 7, he says, "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." God says, I've chosen Isaac and not Ishmael. Verse 8, "the children of the promise are the ones that God regards as descendants." Verse 11, "though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice," and by the way, that is the word from which we get the English word election, "God's purpose according to election would stand, not because of works but because

of Him who calls.” Verse 13, ““JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.”” Look at verse 15,

For he says to Moses, “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I WILL HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.” So then it [*that is, God’s mercy, salvation, mercy*] does not depend on the man who wills [*it doesn’t depend on human decisions*] or the man who runs [*human effort*], but on God who has mercy.

Look down at verse 21, he comes to the illustration of a potter, and he says, “doesn’t the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” God is like the potter, He is free to do with the same lump of clay what He chooses, and he goes on to say there are “vessels of wrath,” verse 22, and there are “vessels of mercy,” verse 23.

Now again, these are things that are hard and difficult to understand and we’ll work through them, but you simply cannot look at this passage and ignore the reality of election. Paul is arguing in this whole text that the Old Testament teaches election, as we’ll see. Go over to chapter 11 verse 5.

In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a [*Jewish*] remnant [*he’s talking about a small number of Jewish people*] according to God’s gracious choice. [*They are a believing, small number of believing Jews who’ve embraced the Messiah, and how did that happen? It happened according to God’s gracious choice.*] But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? What Israel is seeking [*that is, righteousness*], it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened;

Again, some difficult things we have to work through, but the concept of election is very clear.

Or think of Ephesians 1:4, “the Father,” listen to this, “the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.” Or there’s 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5,

Knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction.

You know what Paul is saying? He’s saying, you received the word and believed it because of His choice of you. Second Thessalonians 2:13, “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because,” listen to this, “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation.” Or, there’s 1 Peter 1:1, Peter writes to the believers, scattered abroad from the persecution in Jerusalem, and he says, “you are chosen,” “you are chosen.” You simply cannot deny that the Bible talks about election, so this is a wrong approach to this issue.

A second mistaken idea about election, and many people come to Romans 9 with this, election

they say, is not about God choosing individuals, but about God choosing a group. Some say, God chose the entire church; He chose the church, but He didn't choose the individuals that make it up. Some people are attracted to this view because it seems to allow you to acknowledge that the Bible talks about election, but it appears to dodge the difficult implications of God actually selecting individuals.

Well let me just say, Romans 9 flatly contradicts this view, because it talks about God choosing what? Individuals. Verse 7, Abraham, God chose Abraham and not the rest of the idolaters who were living around him. Verse 7, He also chose Isaac and not Ishmael. Verses 10 through 13, He even chose one twin and not the other, Jacob but not Esau. You see, Romans 9 simply will not allow us to say that God chose a group but not the individuals who make it up.

A third wrong idea about election, also that's often imported into this passage, is that, okay, no, it's true, election is individual, but they would say election is not about God choosing individuals for salvation, but God choosing them for service. So you shouldn't try to see here God selecting individuals for salvation. Instead, you need to see He's identifying them as those He can use, those who will be His servants. But there are several reasons that cannot be true here.

First of all, the whole point of the passage, I mean, what's the point of this passage? It's to explain why more Jews were not believing, individually, and coming to salvation; that's the point of the passage. So it makes no sense for him to be talking about why they were chosen to service. He's talking about salvation.

Also, look at the terms Paul uses. In verse 8, he speaks of the "children of God," "the children of promise." He speaks in verses 7 and 12 of the call. Paul uses these same terms elsewhere to speak of individual salvation, and he does here as well.

But I think there's a third reason this third view can't be true and it's pretty obvious. It's because Paul specifically refers to salvation in this paragraph. Look down at verse 27, "Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, 'THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS A REMNANT [*of the Jewish people*] THAT WILL BE SAVED,' spiritually rescued in context. He's talking here about spiritual salvation. The few God chose from among the Jews constitute a small remnant, and it is that remnant that will be saved. So, there you have what this passage is not teaching about election.

Now having sort of cleared the ground, let's now consider the passage itself. The first thing that we need to understand is the connection between verse 6 and the discussion about election that follows it. Look back in verse 6, there Paul says not every physical descendant of Abraham belongs to true spiritual Israel. Now that invites the question of why. Why is that true? And his answer is, because of divine election. God chose specific descendants of Abraham and that's why they responded. So this section of Romans 9 then, is dealing with God's choice of

specific individuals for salvation. In fact, I think this would be a good time for me to give you a couple definitions of election, just so we're on the same page.

First of all, here's one from Lewis Burkhoff, every word is important, listen carefully, "Election is that eternal act of God whereby He, in His sovereign good pleasure and on account of no unforeseen merit in them, chooses a certain number of people to be recipients of His special grace and of eternal salvation." And he doesn't mean He just chooses a certain number, he means He chooses those individuals; he's clear in the context. Let me give you a shorter definition. Here's from Biblical Doctrines, "Election is God's decision in choosing certain persons for salvation," "God's decision in choosing certain persons for salvation." Now those are the definitions, as we walk through this passage, you are going to see them defended and explained in this context.

So Paul here uses three generations within Israel to explain, to illustrate, and to prove that God, in fact, chose some out of the physical descendants of Abraham for salvation. Let's look at these three generations, these three biblical illustrations. He begins in verse 7 with Abraham himself, Abraham. Notice in verse 7, he specifically references Abraham because that's where it began, right? He mentions Abraham's descendants, but before God chose Abraham's descendants, Scripture is clear that God chose Abraham himself. Now how did God's choice of Abraham manifest itself? God came to Abram while he was still worshiping idols and made a unilateral covenant with him.

Now don't be scared by those words, let me define it, what do I mean? What's a covenant? A covenant, if you're married, you've made a covenant. A covenant is simply a legally binding promise in the context of a relationship. You made a covenant when you were married. You stood before witnesses and God, and you said, I do or I will, or something akin to that. That was a covenant, a legally binding promise in the context of a relationship.

So what's a unilateral covenant? Well, a unilateral covenant is not like marriage, because by a unilateral covenant we mean a covenant initiated and guaranteed by one party without any conditions from the other party. When you get married, you make a covenant and there are conditions and there are promises on both sides. But when you make a unilateral covenant, it means there's just one party who's initiating this, and there are just conditions placed on one party.

Let me give you an illustration. There are a lot of couples in our church who have adopted children. When you chose to adopt that children, that was a unilateral covenant, because that child wasn't expected to fulfill some conditions. You didn't have a list of, I'll do this if you do this and this, you know, clean your room, you know, whatever. No, you instead obligated yourself to that child with absolutely no conditions placed on the child. That is a unilateral covenant, and that's exactly what God did with Abraham. You see, God initiated His relationship with Abraham when Abraham was still an idolater. Don't for a moment think that

God looked down from heaven, and He saw Abraham there in Ur of the Chaldees, and He goes, you know, there is a good one, I'm picking him.

Let me show you. Go back to Joshua. Joshua alludes to this in his sermon to the children of Israel here in Joshua 24, Joshua 24, and he begins his sermon this way in verse 2,

Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, [*that is the Euphrates River, and then he begins to identify them,*] namely, Terah, the father Abraham [*and, of course, Abraham himself*] and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods [*they served other gods*].'"

They were idolaters.

Go down to verse 15, "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve Yahweh," he says to the people of his day, "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve," and he lays three choices before them. Choice number one, maybe it'll be "the gods which your fathers served," again, Abraham, Terah, and so forth, "which were beyond the Euphrates River," when they were in Ur of the Chaldees. Or, second choice, maybe it's "the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living," Maybe it's the people surrounding you, you're going to worship their false gods. Or, third choice, you can serve Yahweh. Make up your mind.

But what I want you to see is that when God came to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham was an idolater, he wasn't a righteous man, seeking God. He was absolutely unworthy of this choice. So how and why did Abraham's circumstances change? Well, look at verse 3 of Joshua 24, "Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him through all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac." Here Joshua says it in broad terms, "I took him." Let's be more specific.

Turn over to Nehemiah, Nehemiah 9:6. Here's this great prayer and notice verse 6,

"You alone are Yahweh.
You made the heavens,
The heaven of heavens with all their host,
The earth and all that is on it,
The seas and all that is in them.
You give life to all of them
And the heavenly host bows down before You. [*Now watch verse 7.*]
You are Yahweh God, [*you are Yahweh Almighty, you are the true God. Now notice how he describes Him, verse 7.*]
Who chose Abram
And brought him out of Ur of the Chaldees,
And gave him the name Abraham."

Why did Abraham's situation change? Because God chose him, an idolater living among idolaters, and God plucked him out and took him from there. In fact, Isaiah 29:22 puts it this way, "the LORD redeemed Abraham." The Lord chose him and the Lord redeemed him, that's how his circumstances changed. Clearly, God's choice of Abraham was based on God's sovereign grace alone. It was completely undeserved. It was completely unilateral. God initiated it and God guaranteed it and Abraham enjoyed the benefits of that.

Now, don't miss your story in Abraham's story. We are Abraham, because left to ourselves that would've been us as well. Maybe you're like me and you were attached to the Christian church, but you were still an idolater. You were still worshiping yourself or something else, or maybe you really were an idolater in the truest sense of that, worshiping who knows what. That's where we were and the only reason our story changed is the same reason Abram's story changed. God chose Abram and took him out, redeemed him. If it hadn't been for God, that's how it would've been. I think it was last week Bob sang that song, "Were It Not For Grace." Well, I can tell you this, were it not for grace, we would all still be idolaters, living in our idolatry.

By the way, this is why election is necessary. A lot of people say, well, why does God need to choose? Because left to ourselves we would still be idolaters and loving it and living in it and loving our sin. Our only hope is a gracious God to bring us out like He brought Abram out. So the first illustration that Paul mentions is Abraham himself.

Now that brings us to his second illustration, Isaac, in verses 7 to 9, Isaac. Here, Paul wants to prove to us that there is a huge difference between a physical descendant of Abraham and being a spiritual descendant. So look at verse 7, "nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants." Now that's a restatement of the end of verse 6, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." But look at that word descendants. This word could potentially be confusing.

The Greek word for descendants, if you have a reference Bible or a Bible that puts a note in the margin, you'll see that the word descendants is the Greek word seed. Now the reason that can be potentially confusing is, the New Testament, and the Old Testament as well, uses that word seed in reference to Abraham three different ways. Sometimes it's used of his physical seed in a collective sense, all of his physical descendants. It's used that way at the beginning of verse 7. The word seed is also used of Abraham's spiritual seed, in a collective sense, that is, all of Abraham's physical descendants who are also true believers. It's used that way from the middle of verse 7 down through verse 8, as we'll see.

In addition to those two ways, because the word seed in the ancient languages as well as in English is a word that has a singular form, even though it can be plural, sometimes it's used in a singular sense to speak of Abraham's greatest descendant, his seed, Galatians 3:16, which is Christ the Messiah. So you have to watch for that as you see this word seed or descendants.

So, let's see if we can discern then what Paul means here. He says, they are not all children who are Abraham's seed or physical descendants. What does he mean by that? Well, he explains it in verse 8. He says they are not all "children of God." They are all Abraham's physical seed, but they are not truly "children of God." The point of the beginning of verse 7 then is that not all Abraham's natural descendants are the true spiritual people of God; they're not children of God. And then he quotes Genesis 21:12 as his biblical support for this point. Notice verse 7, "nor are they all children because," that is, God's children, because "they are Abraham's descendants." They're not his true spiritual children, they're not God's children, because they're his physical children. But, and here's the proof, "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."

Now, what's the context of that statement in Genesis? Well, it comes right after God tells Abram, listen, follow the counsel of Sarah. She's right in this case; she wasn't always right, but she's right in this case. You need to send Ishmael and Ishmael's mother Hagar away. And then he says, "through Isaac your descendants will be named." Now look at that "will be named." That is literally, in the Greek text, "will be called." "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE CALLED."

This is a word Paul uses often for God's call of individuals to salvation. In fact, look back at chapter 8 of Romans, chapter 8 verse 30, "whom he predestined, He also called," same word. What's the point? God told Abraham it is through Isaac and not Ishmael that I will primarily call individuals to become my people and to enjoy the promises that I have made. He says this explicitly in Genesis 17:21, "My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year." You see, don't miss the point, Isaac and Ishmael were both physical descendants of Abraham, but God didn't choose both of them. He chose one of them. He chose Isaac.

But chose him for what? Well verse 8 is Paul's commentary on the Genesis 21 quote. He begins, "That is," so here he's going to explain it, "That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God." Now, the children of the flesh is clear; that's obviously, in context, those who were natural descendants of Abraham. "The children of God," that's an expression Paul never uses except in one sense, and that is those who belong to God because they have been spiritually rescued by Him, in other words, the true children of God.

Go back to Romans 8:16. There we learn, "The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we," believers, "are the children of God." So that "children of God" expression, that's a spiritual expression. So in other words, Paul is talking here about spiritual salvation.

What's this promise, he says "children of the promise," what promise? Well, you have to go back to Genesis 12, and Paul explains it in Romans 4, it's the promise of spiritual blessing brought only by justification by faith. In other words, he's saying here, "not all of the children of the flesh," not all of Abraham's physical descendants, will be saved.

Verse 8 goes on to say, “but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.” Here Paul contrasts “the children of the flesh” with “the children of the promise.” Only “the children of the promise” are the children of God. So who are “the children of the promise”? What does that mean? That means those who have become God’s children as a result of God’s promise.

Don’t miss the comparison between Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was a child of the flesh. He was connected to Abraham only by natural descent. Isaac was a child of promise. He was connected to Abraham not only by natural descent, but by God’s promise.

If you’re a Christian, if you’re in Christ, you are also a child of promise. Galatians 4:28 says this, “you brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise,” because you’ve come to enjoy the same spiritual blessing that comes as a result of justification by faith that Abraham did, that Isaac did. Just like Isaac, we have become God’s children by an act of God’s grace and power in response to His promise of spiritual blessing through justification, through being declared right with God by faith in the work of Christ. We have been born again miraculously as a result of God’s promise.

Now notice the point Paul makes next, it’s surprising. In verse 8 he says, “the children of the promise,” that’s all the spiritual descendants of Abraham, “are regarded as descendants.” Now that’s very surprising. The Greek word translated regarded is an unexpected word, it’s a word that we’ve met often already in the book of Romans, but it’s usually translated “to reckon” or “to count.” Every other time Paul uses this expression it’s in a context like this, “Abraham believed in the LORD; and he reckoned it for righteousness.” But here, Paul doesn’t say, “God reckoned Abraham’s faith as righteousness,” like he does all the other times. Here he says, “God reckoned,” or counted, “the children of the promise as Abraham’s true descendants.”

Now, stay with me. I know this is sweating your brain a little bit, but stay with me, the payoff is worth it. Paul is making a huge theological point here. He is saying that belonging to the people of God, becoming a child of God, is based solely on what? God’s decision. God reckons the children of the promise as Abraham’s true spiritual descendants. It’s God’s choice; it’s not race, but grace.

Verse 9, “For,” here’s why Isaac is called a child of promise, “this is the word of promise,” this is the message of promise that was delivered to Abraham, and then Paul quotes Genesis 18:10, here is the word of promise, ““AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON.”” Now, this isn’t the first time God said they would have a son. In fact, the first time God promises Abraham and Sarah they’re going to have a child in spite of their old age and Sarah’s barrenness, is in Genesis 17:15-16. But then God comes back in Genesis 18 and He reiterates it in verse 10 of chapter 18 of Genesis and verse 14. Paul here quotes a combination of those two verses. He pulls a little bit of verse 10 and a little bit of verse 14 and combines them. He intentionally chooses language to emphasize that God took the initiative in creating true spiritual Israel.

Isaac was a physical son of Abraham just like Ishmael, but Isaac was different. Isaac was born in extremely unusual circumstances. His conception and his birth were miraculous, a direct act of God. He was the direct fulfillment of a promise that God had made to Abraham. So Isaac was a child of promise. But look at that verse again, verse 9. God meant more than just predicting Isaac's birth. Instead, God declared that He would come. He would come in a special demonstration of His power, and God Himself would miraculously produce Isaac in the dead womb of Sarah through the seed of nearly dead Abraham.

So in sovereign grace, think about this now, don't miss this point, this is where Paul is building, in sovereign grace, God passed over Ishmael, the older son of Abraham, and He chose instead to miraculously produce a child who would be the spiritual descendant of Abraham. God made a sovereign choice, or selection, between the two sons of Abraham. He decided that Isaac would be the recipient of His covenant promises.

Now we get to the application for us. What does all this have to do with us? Well, let's ask it this way, what are the key points that this passage makes about God's election of Isaac? Because once we understand those, we understand our own. This is encouraging, I think you'll be deeply encouraged by this, because here's where Paul is building, this is the spiritual point he's making.

Key point number one about God's election of Isaac, God made a sovereign decision that His covenant promises would be fulfilled in Isaac. God just decided. It's not Ishmael. It's Isaac. God chose him. He simply chose. Now you understand why Paul would say in Ephesians 1:4, the Father "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." It's the same thing. Just like Isaac, God simply chose you, Christian. He chose you. He could've chosen Ishmael, but He chose Isaac. He could've chosen someone else, but He chose you. It was a sovereign decision on the part of God.

Number two, God chose Isaac before he was conceived or born. Did you notice in verse 9, God says, "AT THIS TIME [*next year*]." Now unless Sarah was an elephant, the gestation period was nine months. That means when God says this, he hasn't been conceived, and of course, he certainly hasn't been born. So God chose him before he existed. What's the implication of that? Well, we're going to get to this next week, but look down to verse 11 because here it's about the twins, Jacob and Esau, "for though the twins were not yet born, [*so what's the implication of that?*]" and had not done anything good or bad." You see, the fact that God chooses before a person is born is implying that God's choice of Isaac, and let me add, God's choice of you, is not based on your merit or demerit. In fact, it's based on nothing in you at all, just like it was in Isaac. It was simply God's choice. That is a very humbling reality.

There's a third key point here that God makes about His election of Isaac. God chose Isaac for this purpose, to be His spiritual child. Notice verse 8, the child of the promise was to be a child of God. This wasn't just about a piece of land in the Middle East, this was specifically about the

spiritual promises in the Abrahamic Covenant. By the way, there are still physical promises to be fulfilled; we're going to get there in chapter 11. But here he's dealing with the spiritual promises, the spiritual promise of blessing. Nobody deserves blessing, we all deserve cursing, but God promised blessing. How? Through the Messiah and the justification that He would bring. And He chooses Isaac to that spiritual purpose, to be His child.

Christian, do you understand that's exactly what happened with you? God made a sovereign decision, and it was based on absolutely nothing about you. It was just grace, and He decided to make you His child. That's why He started this process. He decided that He was going to adopt you, that you were going to be His, just like Isaac.

There's a fourth key point about God's election of Isaac that applies to us and that's, even though God had already chosen Isaac, remember He chose him before his conception, before his birth, even though God already chosen Isaac, He had to miraculously intervene to give Isaac physical life. Why? Because Abraham was very old, 99. Sarah was 90, her womb was dead. No way a child is coming out of that physically. So God had said, I'm going to choose Isaac, but for that to happen, I have to intervene miraculously for that to even be possible. I love that statement, "I WILL COME." Listen, I mean, God didn't have say that, right? God is everywhere; He was already there. So why does He say that? He's saying, I'm going to come in a special demonstration of my power, and Sarah's going to have a child. In the same way, God has made the promise of justification to all of Abraham's spiritual descendants.

God chose you for that spiritual blessing, but the only way that could ever happen is for God to come at some point in your life in the person of the Holy Spirit and miraculously give you life or it would never happen. You would have as much chance of being born spiritually without that miraculous intervention as Isaac had of being born physically to a 99 and 90 year-old couple.

You are a spiritual descendant of Abraham because God miraculously intervened and brought life where there was death and decay. You are a child of promise. Believer, do you understand? God chose you in the same way He chose Isaac. It's very humbling, but it's also incredibly rich.

If you're here this morning and you're not a follower of Jesus Christ, in one sense, studying this passage is like reading somebody else's mail. This passage really isn't for you. Don't you be tempted to ask yourself, am I elect, am I chosen by God? That's not the right question for you. Here's the question for you, am I willing to repent of my sin and rebellion against God my Creator, and to come to Him His way through His Son, through the life and death of His Son, lived in my place, died in my place in order to purchase my forgiveness, and God raised Him from the dead? Your question is, am I willing to do that? Because God says, if you're willing to do that, He will receive you.

You say, well how do I know if I'm elect? You repent and believe, and if you repent and

believe even today, it will be an indication that God is in the message I'm preaching today to draw you to Himself, and you will have proven to be, once you get through that door, chosen by God. But don't ask yourself the question, am I chosen? Ask yourself, am I willing to lay down my rebellion and to come to God His way through His Son, Jesus Christ? Let's pray together.

Father, we are not made proud by the truth of election, but rather we are humbled to the dust. Because we realize that, like Abraham, we were all just idolaters, worshiping something other than You, when in grace, You saved us. And Lord, Your grace toward us even goes back farther, into eternity past when You chose us because of nothing in us, but just because of Your grace. Father, we are humbled, but grateful. Give us hearts overflowing with gratitude. May we love You more profoundly knowing that our salvation is all You.

Father, I also pray for those here this morning who may not be in Christ. I pray that they wouldn't ask the wrong question, but instead, they would see Your open invitation to come, and that today they would leave their rebellion and turn to You, the true God, and find You gracious, with arms open to welcome them. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.