

*All Roads Lead Here: Abraham's Children*  
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*Genesis 21:1-13; John 15:12-17; Romans 9:6-15*

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Romans 9:6-15. This is the Word of God for the people of God. "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad -- in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls -- she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.""

We love being in control. We all like to feel we're in charge of our own situation. My director at Compassion is obsessive about having an organized desk – not a clean desk, but an organized desk. Personally, I can't tell you how good it makes me feel when all my CDs and DVDs and books are perfectly alphabetized. Some people need their pizza with just the right amount of pepperoni. Others of us only feel in control if we don't throw anything away – we know we don't need that rusty baby spoon any more, nobody's going to eat with it, but are we sure it won't come in handy someday?

Control gives us a sense of comfort in a world that is topsy-turvy. If we can't control everything, we can control this one thing. Honestly, we often treat God as less the awe-inspiring, fear-provoking, amazing, all-knowing, all-powerful being that He is and more like a way to gain some control. When we're sick or our bills aren't being paid or our emotional state is dangling by a thread, we turn to God. But often – and I do this too, so I'm not preaching at you but at myself – once our problem is solved, we go right back to wanting control, to thinking our destiny is up to us. "Thanks, God, I've got it from here."

But today's passage from Romans gives us a glimpse into how God has worked out salvation in history, and it teaches us that He is the only One who is truly in control. As we continue to look at predestination and God's divine control called sovereignty over the next few weeks, you may be frustrated. Paul gives us a perspective that isn't very popular; it has caused controversy in the church. But if we start to grasp God's sovereignty, we will fight it less and embrace His love as the truly unconditional love it is.

Let's start by reviewing what we learned last week: the true, spiritual Israel is the group of people throughout the world who have been chosen by God, who love God and serve Him. This group, which Paul calls "Abraham's children," includes all faithful believers, including us. It includes all people, including the Jews throughout history, who trusted in God for salvation and have put their faith in His Son, Jesus.

But not all people of physical Jewish descent are Abraham's children. Not all Jews are saved. Why is that the case? You would think that it would be a natural slam-dunk. God promised Abraham that he'd have more descendants than stars in the sky. Why do some Jewish people follow God and why do many others fall away?

Our natural thought is that it's because of free will. We imagine it to be simple, that some of Abraham's descendants followed Abraham's god and others didn't. It was their choice. Their fate was in their hands; some chose wisely and some chose poorly. While this isn't completely wrong, it's an incomplete view. We absolutely are responsible for our decisions. When we talk about God's sovereignty, we aren't taking away our human freedom and accountability. Instead, when we understand God's sovereignty, we realize that God is infinitely greater than us, and His free will takes precedence over our free will. When we exercise our human free will, it lines up with the plans and purposes that He put in place long before we came to be. God's choices determine the course of our history.

When Paul explains that not every physical descendent of Abraham is a child of the promise, he starts to explain God's sovereignty by quoting an ancient Scripture: "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." He goes on: "In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.""

Paul is quoting from the Old Testament, the first book of the Bible, Genesis. God made a promise to Abraham when he was 75 years old. He promised to bless Abraham and make a great nation out of his descendants. Abraham believed God, and God declared Abraham righteous because of that faith. But Abraham's trust in God was far from perfect. Abraham and Sarah, his wife, were unable to have children. Not only that, they were both quite old. Having children appeared to be a biological impossibility for them.

Ten years passed with no further word from God and no children. So Sarah takes matters in her own hands. She has an Egyptian maid named Hagar, and she tells Abraham, "Take my maid as your second wife; we can have a family through her." Weird plan, but that's what they did. Abraham follows Sarah's instructions, and Hagar has a son named Ishmael. Ishmael is Abraham's firstborn child.

But the thing is, Ishmael was the child Abraham tried to make happen. Ishmael is not the child of God's promise. God's promise was to Abraham and Sarah. And God keeps His promise. They have Isaac 25 years after God spoke to Abraham – when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. God made a people out of Ishmael, but it's through Isaac that Abraham's physical descendants, the Jewish people, come from. It is through them that Jesus eventually comes to us.

Then we come to Isaac's children, Jacob and Esau. They are twins; they share the same parents. Esau is technically the older of the two. Yet Jacob winds up with his father's blessing; it's Jacob through whom the promise is kept; it's the descendants of Jacob, not Esau, that become the twelve tribes of Israel. And this order of things was told to Rebekah before the children ever left her womb. God made His plans and kept them.

Paul quotes the prophet Malachi, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Now Hebrew uses a lot of hyperbole; Jesus uses hyperbole when He says that no one can be His disciple who doesn’t hate his mother and father and brothers and his own life. We know it’s hyperbole because Jesus tells His followers to keep the commandment to honor our mothers and fathers. God doesn’t hate Esau in a violent or repulsive sense. But the love He displays for Jacob is far greater; Esau is hated in comparison.

That doesn’t mean Esau had nothing; he became very wealthy. His people, the Edomites, were Israel’s neighbor that threatened them for centuries. The Herods who ruled Israel during Jesus’ time were descendants of the Edomite clans. Esau’s descendants lived near Israel for well over two thousand years. But they were not the people of God’s promise. They did not receive God’s laws, God’s temple, God’s relationship, God’s blessing. All those went to the descendants of Jacob. Esau’s people received earthly wealth, but not what really matters.

This brings up the question: did God do something wrong when He chose Isaac and not Ishmael, when He chose Jacob and not Esau? Absolutely not! God was very clear about this with Moses. God said to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” God’s choices are not dependent on our choices. He chooses, and everything else follows from that.

Now you may object to this. Most of us do. But we’re going to get into those objections next week when Paul does. This week, I want us to focus on what we learn specifically from this passage and what it means for us who believe. And our first concept is this: *God’s choices undermine our natural tendencies and inclinations and show us His heart.*

God’s choices don’t make much sense to us because they are so unlike the choices we make. They don’t follow the rules we make up. What’s so odd about Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau? In both situations, God blessed the younger child. This wasn’t the way things went in the ancient Middle East. The first born male received a double portion of the inheritance and the father’s uniquely special blessing. He was revered over all the rest.

It’s not just with these two that God operates this way. Generations later, God sent the priest named Samuel to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as Israel’s new king. Jesse brought all his sons to Samuel except one – the youngest one, the runt. That was David, left in the fields to tend the sheep because surely he wouldn’t be chosen. Samuel himself thought that the strongest and tallest of Jesse’s sons would surely be the new king, but that wasn’t God’s plan. David was God’s chosen. The king David replaced, King Saul, was an imposing figure. But it was young David that defeated Goliath, who routed the armies of the Philistines and who the Lord favored.

God does this again and again. God chooses murderers, cowards, braggarts, drunkards, and other nefarious folks, cleans them up, and accomplishes His purposes through them. People love the powerful; God loves the powerless. The Jews expect a warrior messiah to lead them into holy war against Rome; they get Jesus who says His Kingdom is not of this world. People follow the Pharisees because they seem holy; God hangs out with notorious sinners who meet Him and change. Everybody wants to be somebody; Jesus becomes a nobody and dies a horrifying death to show us the way to greatness isn’t through selfishness but self-sacrifice.

God's choices upset our apple cart. God's choices bother us because they don't follow our expectations. We want everything to fit into our systems so we can alphabetize it and sort it and control it. God's choices run contrary to all that. Why does He do that? In part, it's so that we learn to trust Him and not our reasoning and our instincts and our intuition. It's so we see that He is in control and not us. Giving up control is hard. But the beauty is that when we begin to see that God loves us deeply, we give up control knowing He wants the very best for us.

And let's move to that: the fact that God is sovereign and makes the choice to save His people means that *we who belong to Him are loved unconditionally*. Paul instructs us that God made His choice of Jacob over Esau before the twins "were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls." And the story of Jacob reminds us that God didn't choose him because he was a nice guy. Jacob is a schemer, a swindler, a trickster who repeatedly tries to get an edge over his opponents, who allows his wives and family to keep idols around well after God has spoken to him. Yet God brings Jacob around. God loves Jacob simply because He loves Jacob.

We are really well acquainted with conditional love. Most all the love we receive is conditioned on some factors. The divorce rate in our country tells us that the condition for love in many marriages is not "death do us part" but "as long as I keep feeling warm fuzzy love towards you." Children often know that their parents have expectations for them that they must meet in order to receive the affection they want. Even the love of friends is often conditional – if you don't keep liking the same things I do, eventually we'll grow apart and stop hanging out together. We are used to people's love for us rising and falling on our attitude, our personality, our likes and dislikes, even how we look or what the scale says about us. And it's pretty miserable to know that someone's love for you is only as good as how well you perform.

That's our expectation of God, too. God will only love me if I do good. God will only love me if I don't swear. God will only love me if I read my Bible every day. God will only love me if I never doubt and never get angry and never lust. God will only love me if, if, if, if. That's not to say that we don't want those things. We want to please God; when we trust in God, we want to be faithful people who follow His ways because they are what's best for us.

But God loves His children unconditionally. He not only chose you before you were born, Ephesians 1:4 says He chose you before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight through Jesus. He loves you no matter what you've done; He's chosen you in spite of what you will do. That's no license to go do terrible things; if we love Him and have been chosen by Him, that's the last thing we want! But His love is unconditional. It is not based in your merit but in God's own goodness.

What we find is that when we pursue God – when we read the Scripture, when we pray, when we worship, when we humble ourselves and serve others in His name – it doesn't increase God's love for us one iota. Instead, it reveals more and more of that perfect, unchanging, unconditional love to us. When we know we are loved unconditionally, it inspires us, it frees us, to try new things, to risk loving hard people to love, to risk helping out in hard to reach and dangerous places. Because when we understand, when we "get," God's unconditional love, we stop worrying if we're in or if we're out of God's Kingdom. We just start acting like we're in.

But how is God justified in choosing the way that He does, arbitrarily saying “yes” to this person and “no” to that person? It all goes back to God’s words to Moses: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” God has the right to show mercy and compassion on whoever He wants. Mercy and compassion entail giving free aid to someone we don’t owe anything.

We sometimes think of doctors and nurses as merciful and compassionate, and there’s an element of those things in medicine. But have you looked at your doctor’s bill lately? Many doctors are kind, but nobody’s operating on you here in the States for free. And occasionally you’ll find a doctor who runs a free clinic or devotes part of their time to charity. But what do they do? They set rules – you must be at the poverty line to get my help for free. You must be under a certain age. You must not qualify for Medicare or Medicaid. And yet that’s still very compassionate and merciful because they don’t have to do it. Even though that free clinic doesn’t serve everybody, there’s no disagreement that that doctor is compassionate and merciful.

In the same way, *God has the right to choose who He shows compassion to.* And unlike the doctor in the free clinic, everyone who receives God’s mercy has wronged Him in a big way. They have broken His laws; they have disobeyed and rebelled against Him. We all deserve God’s condemnation and punishment. Yet God chooses out of His compassion to save some of us – not just to give us the blessing of life here and now, but the blessing of eternal life through His Son.

It is incredible, given all we do, that God chooses anyone to be Abraham’s children, children of the promise, those of us that God adopts into His family and calls His own. And yet He does! And He loves us, He showers us with affection, He trains us to be righteous, to be more like Him. Even those whom He does not bless with salvation, He treats far better than deserved based on our actions.

Some of this may seem harsh or unfair, and that’s what we’ll discuss next week. I promise you for now that God is always justified in what He does. So turn to Him. Trust in His Son Jesus who gave Himself up for the sins of His people. And when you do, when you choose to follow Christ, you will find the surprising and mysterious joy that God actually chose you first, that He loves you unconditionally, and He always will.