

"Love Before Time"
Sermon Series on Romans: *The Fifth Gospel*
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Romans 9:1-29)

Introduction.

Someone once made the comment, "It takes all the water of the Baptists and all the fire of the Methodists in order to make enough steam to run the machinery of Presbyterianism!" They may be right! If you were to ask most people who know something about the differences in denominations what Presbyterians are especially known, they would probably mention two things –Presbyterians are known for doing things decently and in order (and usually by committee!), and they are also known for the doctrine of election, or predestination as it is also called. This morning I want to talk about the P-word – predestination and what the Bible teaches about election.

The very mention of the word "election" strikes fear into the hearts of preachers! I was talking to someone recently who asked me what I was speaking on this Sunday, and when I told them, they said, "Better you than me!" But we can't avoid what the Bible says about election. The word appears right here in the book of Romans. The word "election" is a biblical word, and so is the word "predestination." So, we all need to deal with it and figure out what it means.

Before we look at the passage itself, I want to say two things by way of introduction. I want to tell you a story, and then I want to set this passage in its context. First, the story. The first time I encountered the biblical idea of election I was a junior in college. The woman I was dating at the time and I were in a Bible study together, and the leader of the group taught a lesson which drew heavily upon A.W. Pink's book *The Sovereignty of God*. I came away from that Bible study with such excitement, because for the first time in my life I clearly understood the lengths to which God had gone not only to accomplish my salvation but also to secure it. I saw in a new way that I can trust God with my future and the fact that my salvation isn't dependent on me.

However, the woman I was dating (her name was Ann) came away from the study quite upset, and she felt that what the leader shared made God look unfair and capricious. So, I learned early on that the idea of election can divide people, and honest Christians disagree over how to interpret the Bible in this matter. (You will note that I did not marry Ann.)

The second thing I want to say by way of introduction is to set this passage in its context. For several chapters, now, Paul has been talking about the sovereignty of God. In chapter 5 he talked about God's sovereignty over death; in chapters 6 and 7 he wrote about God's sovereignty over sin; and in chapter 8 the apostle wrote about God's sovereignty over suffering. And now in chapter 9 Paul writes about God's sovereignty over salvation. I think we need to be careful not to be selective when we read the Bible. If we rejoice in God's sovereignty over death, and sin, and suffering, then we must be prepared to also embrace God's sovereignty over salvation too.

Having said all this by way of introduction, let's now turn our attention to the passage itself.

I. The Problem of Israel's Rejection.

In each of the next 3 chapters (9, 10 and 11) of the book of Romans Paul begins with a personal statement in which he identifies with the people of Israel, and he expresses his profound spiritual concern for them. To Paul Israel's unbelief was far more than an intellectual problem or quandary. He writes about it from a personal perspective, and he expresses the sorrow and anguish he feels for them. He also tells of his prayerful longing for their salvation, and his conviction that God had not rejected them.

But the apostle can't dodge the reality of the question that surfaces – how could the people of Israel with their unique privileges and blessings reject their own Messiah? If God is sovereign, like you say, Paul, then how can the unbelief of Israel be explained? Even more to the point, did God's promises to Israel in the OT fail?

At first sight it would appear that God's promise to Israel had indeed failed, because He promised to bless them and that He would never forsake them. But the reality is that Israel forfeited the blessing of God because of their unbelief. Paul says Israel's failure was her own. She had been the recipient of so many blessings and privileges, and yet in spite of all this, she chose to go her own way and reject God's good gift of salvation in Christ.

Paul mentions eight privileges that had been given to Israel.

- They were the children of God, adopted as His own sons and daughters.
- They had seen the divine glory of God, the shekinah of the Lord in the wilderness and beheld the splendor of His presence.
- They had been given the covenants of God – the Lord had entered into a covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David.
- They had been given the OT Law, their most prized possession, the moral code which outlined what God expected of His people.
- They had been given the Temple in which the people of Israel could worship and where the very presence of God dwelt.
- They had been given the patriarchs. They worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their ancestors walked with God, and from them the human ancestry of Jesus could be traced. It came through their bloodline, their race.
- And they had been given Christ Himself. Jesus' ministry was to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. Israel was the first in line.

Yet in spite of all these privileges, in spite of the blessings God had given them, they rejected the Messiah God sent to bring salvation.

History is filled with people who have been given a great deal in terms of privilege and blessing, but they squandered that privilege and wasted the blessing. Think of someone in your own life or perhaps someone in the world of sports, business, or entertainment. They had everything going for them, and they just wasted their opportunities. Israel's rejection of Jesus wasn't due to a failure of God's word or a failure of God to keep His promise. No, their rejection was due to their unbelief. They threw away their blessings, and they forfeited their privilege.

What does this say, then, about God's sovereignty in the world? Have His plans been thwarted? Is God in control? That leads us to the second point I want for us to consider this morning.

II. The Principle of God's Election.

Far from God's plans being thwarted, the fact of Israel's rejection reproduced a pattern of God's action which had been repeated often in the past, namely that God chose to work throughout history through a remnant of people, an elect chosen minority. Now, when we think of the word "election", we usually think in terms of political campaigns and voting at the polls. We elect a certain candidate because we think they are the best person for the job (or because we can't stand the other individual who is running). But when the Bible uses the word "election", it does so in a very different sense.

We tend to select people because we think they are the best candidate or because of what we think they can do for us or for the country. But in the case of God's election, He chooses us not on the basis that we're wonderful candidates (remember, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God), and He doesn't choose us because of what we can do for Him. Rather, it's on the basis of what God can do for us that we are chosen. God's choice has nothing to do with who we are and what we can do for God. Rather, it has everything to do with who He is what He can do for us. It's like Michael Jordan picking me to be on his basketball team. It's not what I can do for Michael. It's what Michael can do for me.

A. Election Defined. Paul starts off by explaining what election, or predestination, is all about in verses 6-23, and he demonstrates how in the OT God chose to work through particular people in Jewish history. The apostle explains what he means by referring to two well-known stories in the OT, and both involve Abraham's family. First, the apostle reminds his readers that Abraham had two sons – Isaac and Ishmael, but only Isaac was the son of promise, not Ishmael. Why? Because of God's election, His choice?

Then Paul turns to his second illustration of Isaac and his two sons – Jacob and Esau. And here Paul shows that just as God chose Isaac, not Ishmael, to be the recipient of His promise, He also chose Jacob and not Esau. And in this case, it was even clearer that God's decision had nothing whatsoever to do with any positive attributes in the boys themselves, because there wasn't anything to distinguish them from one another. They were newborns.

The point Paul is making here is that it wasn't on the basis of good deeds, or a nice personality, or even a desire to find God or live a godly life that God chose to work in and through the people Paul mentions. Rather, it was only by His grace, which is unmerited, that He did so. And Paul implies that is still true today when one person becomes a follower of Christ, but another person doesn't. It's because God's grace is at work in their lives, not because they're good people, or even because they have a spiritual hunger.

Earlier in his letter Paul writes, *"There is no one righteous.... All have turned away. ...For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rm. 6:10-12, 23)*. We have all gone our own way, and it is only because God in His mercy reaches down into our lives and turns on the lights spiritually in our hearts that any of us are able to see and appropriate God's love for us in Christ. This point is highlighted in v. 16 of our passage when Paul writes, *"It does not, therefore, depend on a person's effort or desire, but solely on God's mercy."*

B. Election Defended. After Paul explains the principle of election, he goes on to defend it, and he anticipates objections people will have, and he answers them. **The first objection** is how my girlfriend Ann reacted, "This isn't fair. God is unjust! To choose some people for salvation and pass over others isn't fair!" Paul's response is, "Not at all!" And he goes on to explain why when he writes, "*For [God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion' (15).*

Paul defends God justice by proclaiming His mercy, and he demonstrates that the basis on which God saves anyone isn't justice or by what is fair. It's mercy. As he writes in verse 16, our salvation doesn't depend on our desire, or effort, or anything we can do. Rather, our salvation depends solely on God's mercy. So, God isn't unjust in saving some but not everyone. Rather, He is merciful in saving anyone of us.

If you and I are interested in God being just and fair, then we're all in a heap of trouble. For God to be fair and just would mean that all of us would be condemned to hell, and none of us would have any hope of salvation. It is God's mercy that some are spared God's judgment at all.

The second objection Paul anticipates and answers in verses 19-29 is, "Then why does God still blame us? If salvation is entirely due to God's will, then why does He still blame us, for who can resist God's will?" To this question Paul responds by explaining that God has the right to do whatever He wants to just like a potter can do whatever he likes with his lump of clay. Paul asks, "*Shall what is formed say to Him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (v.20).* The point he's making is that we need to remember who we are and who God is. He is God, and we're not. He's the creator; we're creatures.

Now, Paul isn't criticizing someone who sincerely wants to ask a perplexing question. Rather, he's challenging the person who wants to argue with God. "*But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?" (v.20).* Such a person has a spirit of rebellion, and that person refuses to let God be God and acknowledge their true status as a creature God created. Paul suggests that instead of being presumptuous, we, like Moses, need to keep our distance, take off our shoes because we're on holy ground, and we should cover our faces. We should be like Job who put his hand over his mouth and acknowledged that he was speaking of things he didn't really understand.

Paul isn't trying to shut down honest questions here. What he's disputing is for the pot to challenge the potter's right to do whatever he wants to with the lump of clay. When you get right down to it, the truth of all this is beyond the ability of our finite minds to fully comprehend and understand the infinite truth concerning election. As the Bible says, God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. Later in chapter 11 of this letter Paul writes, "*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who have been His counselor?" (11:33,34).*

Whenever we come to the doctrine of election, we need to have humility and acknowledge that we don't fully understand these things. The Bible teaches two truths about election – God is sovereign, and we're responsible for our choices. Somehow both statements are true. There is a fancy word which describes this kind of situation, and it's the word "antinomy". An antinomy is a contradiction or an inconsistency between two apparently reasonable principles

or laws. An example of this is light, which is both a particle and a wave at the same time. And so it is that God is sovereign and we're responsible, both at the same time.

How do we hold all this together in our minds? I have found that Aesop's fable of the North Wind and the Sun helps me to understand it. The North Wind and the Sun were arguing one day about who was the greater of the two. The North Wind said, "I am more powerful," and the Sun said, "I am more powerful." So, they decided to establish a test which would determine which of them was the stronger. There was a man who was climbing up a hill, and he was wearing an overcoat. They decided that the first one who could get the coat off the man would prove that he was the stronger.

The North Wind went first, and he blew cold wind from the North Pole as hard as he could, trying to blow the coat of the man. But the harder he blew, the more the man clutched the coat to his chest, and eventually the North Wind blew himself out. Then the Sun stepped up and said, "It's my turn, now." And the Sun was clever. He raised his temperature until it was 100 degrees. As the man walked up the hill he began to perspire and sweat began to roll down his face. As it grew hotter and hotter, the man of his own free will took off his coat to cool himself down. And so, the Sun demonstrated that he was the more powerful.

I believe that you and I are free moral beings, but I also believe that God is sovereign. And in His grace God so conditions our environment through people and circumstances that we, of our own free will, make a decision to follow Christ. We make a choice to follow Jesus, but in a larger sense, He chooses us to follow Him. Isn't that what the Bible says? You'll recall that He told His disciples plainly, *"You did not choose Me; I chose you" (Jn. 15:16)*. And elsewhere in John's gospel Jesus said, *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him, and I will raise him up on the last day" (6:44)*.

The Bible's teaching on election is a bit of a mystery, and we're unwise when we try to explain it in such a way that no puzzles, enigmas, or loose ends are left. But we also need to remember that election is something that the Bible teaches – the word is right here in the Bible.

Conclusion.

Some of you may still be unsettled by this passage of Scripture, and I confess it's pretty difficult to understand. But I hope that you can see that the Bible's teaching on election and predestination is rooted in the passionate love of God as the Hound of Heaven. Election is God's love before time expressed in His passionate pursuit of us.

I close with this. When I was in seminary, I had a professor by the name of Gordon Fee who told us in class one day that there is a famous painting by Holman Hunt of Jesus knocking at the door. It's a metaphor taken from Revelation 3:16 in which Jesus says, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hear My voice and open the door, I will come in and sup with him."* In the painting Jesus is knocking on the door, holding a lamp in the night. There is no doorknob on the outside of the door. Jesus is just knocking, implying that we have to open the door to let Him in.

Dr. Fee told us there was a German theologian who once saw the painting in an art gallery. He had been studying the life of Paul, and he was gripped in a fresh way by the grace of God which came crashing into his own personal life through Christ. He stood there looking at the painting and finally blurted out, "No! No! No! This is not the right picture! It is not Jesus standing on the outside knocking with no doorknob. Rather, it is man on the inside with the

door locked, bolted and double bolted, and furniture stacked up against the door. But Jesus who is on the outside takes the cross, and He smashes the door down, and rushes into the man's life and claims him and says, "You're Mine! You're Mine! I have chosen you!"¹

Look back over the course of your life. Do you see the fingerprints of God all over it? Do you see the ways in which God as the Hound of Heaven sought you for His own? Do you see the ways in which Jesus, the Lover of your soul, wooed you to Himself? If you do, then you have experienced what the Bible says about election. Thanks be to God for His loving kindness that before the foundations of the world, He chose us that we might know and love and follow Him and experience His everlasting life. Thanks be to God there was love before time even began. Amen.

Prayer.

¹Taken from a lecture given by Gordon Fee in 1976.