

*The Mysterious yet Merciful Purpose of God*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 20, 2022.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 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 offspring. For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 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.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills (Romans 9:6-18).<sup>1</sup>

If God chose Israel through the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to be his people, why did they reject their Messiah, whom God promised and sent? Did God not reveal his glory to them on Mount Sinai, in the tabernacle, and in the temple? Did he not make his dwelling among them? Did God not choose Israel to receive his covenants, to keep his law, to worship him in truth? It would seem that Israel’s rejection of Christ renders God’s redemptive purpose and plan a failure. God chose Israel, but they rejected Christ. Mission failed.

From a human perspective, captive to time and space and ensnared by fleshly influence, we might even assume that the gospel to the Gentiles was a divine reaction to Israel’s rejection, like a spurned lover’s rebound. But God is neither captive to time or space nor does he contend with a sinful nature. He is holy. His purpose is never thwarted; his plans never fail. As he says through Isaiah, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose...I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it’” (Isa. 46:9-11). We can remove failure from our vocabulary when we speak of God.

Connecting God’s purpose with what he has spoken in his holy Word, Paul reminds us, “it is not as though the Word of God has failed” (9:6). It has not; it cannot. Why then did Israel, as a whole, reject Christ? Search as you may, the answer is not found in Israel’s history but is hidden in God’s purpose. What he purposes prevails, but that doesn’t mean it’s always clear to us. Perhaps the question to ask is: What was the manifest purpose of Israel?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

## **The Manifest Purpose of Israel**

Paul makes a seemingly confusing statement, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (9:6), leading us to wonder: Who is “Israel”? Are there more than one? In short, as Paul will explain, yes, but you must pay careful attention to the context to understand the difference. As we will see in the upcoming passages (and sermons), Paul distinguishes between “natural” Israel and “spiritual” Israel: “not all who are descended from [natural] Israel belong to [spiritual] Israel.”

Natural Israel consisted of the descendants of Jacob, the son of Isaac and heir of Abraham. God changed Jacob’s name to Israel, and one became many, Israel became one nation. They were God’s chosen people through whom Christ came. The confusion arises, and thus Paul’s need to distinguish, when the Israelites presumed salvation based on ethnic descent rather than devotion, and ancestral favor rather than faith. So, Paul makes the distinction between the natural and the spiritual—not every Israelite would be saved.

To help us understand this, Paul takes us back to Abraham, whom God chose, called, and promised blessing upon his “offspring,” or literally his “seed,” in and through Isaac. God said to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant with [Isaac] as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him” (Gen. 17:18-19). Though Ishmael was the natural son of Abraham, it was through Isaac God chose to fulfill his promise, revealing that God’s purpose is not in biological descent but in the promise. “This means,” Paul explains, “that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (9:8). Just as all of natural Israel is not of spiritual Israel, so all of Abraham’s natural children are his spiritual children. The point is the same: Salvation is not by natural descent.

If God did not save every Israelite, what then was his purpose in Israel? As God promised Abraham, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3), so he fulfilled through Israel: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Through Isaiah, God told Israel, “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). And through Israel came Christ Jesus, “the light of the world” (John 8:12). God’s manifest purpose in Israel was his promise fulfilled in Christ, to redeem spiritual Israel, Abraham’s true children, from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

## **The Mysterious Purpose of Election**

God accomplished his purpose in choosing Abraham not others, in choosing Isaac not Ishmael, in choosing Jacob not Esau, “not because of works but because of him who calls” (9:11). Such is the mystery of God’s sovereign election: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined... And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30). Not because of foreseen faith nor “because of works but because of him who calls.” And he who calls effectually calls only those whom he foreknew and predestined.

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To emphasize this point, Paul points us to Rebekah's womb, where twin boys await their birth. Though neither had yet the opportunity to do good or bad, God loved one; the other he hated (Mal. 1:2-3). In his sovereign purpose, God had chosen Jacob, passing over Esau, for no inherent reason, other than the praise of the glorious grace of God. In the mysterious purpose of election, what is quite clear is that God bestows his mercy and compassion upon whom he will (9:15).

Yet, to ears accustomed to the contemporary version of unconditional love, Paul's quotation from Malachi sounds merciless. Did God *really* hate Esau? If God is love, and he is (1 John 4:8), then doesn't he love everyone? And if he loves everyone, how could he hate unborn Esau? Or anyone else, for that matter? To help answer these questions, I want to make a distinction between *the universal love of God's common grace* and *the exclusive love of God's sovereign grace*.

According to the universal love of God's common grace, God loved Esau as he loves everyone he created. As Jesus explained, God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). And Paul preached at Lystra, God "did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:16). Esau married, had children, and grew very wealthy. In his later years, he reconciled with his brother Jacob and grew into a nation of his own, Edom. He enjoyed the earthly blessings of God's common grace. Created in God's image he was loved, but not like Jacob.

According to the exclusive love of God's sovereign grace, Jacob was chosen by God "before the foundation of the world" that he "should be holy and blameless" before God. In love God predestined Jacob exclusively for adoption to himself as a son. And God did this for no inherent reason in Jacob but "according to the purposed of [God's] will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:4-6). In his sovereign mercy and grace, God loved Jacob with an everlasting love.

### **The Merciful Purpose of God**

Paul anticipates our response: How can that be fair? The doctrine of election seemingly goes against our sense of fairness. One may wonder: Doesn't Esau get a say in the matter, an opportunity to do good, a chance to please God? In short, yes. In fact, we all do. In the pass or fail test of God's holiness, Esau failed, Jacob failed, you failed, me too. Let us remember, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom. 3:10-11). In case you forgot, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

The question is not one of fairness. If that were the case, no one would be saved. No, to understand we must look not to whether we are worthy but to God's sovereign mercy, which Paul explains directing us back to Exodus and Moses' interaction with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Even before God sent Moses back to Egypt he told him, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 7:3). Yes, God sent Moses, and Moses went. Yes, Moses appealed to Pharaoh for Israel's freedom. Yes, Pharaoh denied Moses' request. Of course, God didn't need to instill evil in Pharaoh's heart; it was already there. He merely gave him over to do what he desired. Pharaoh did not want to free Israel for a myriad of reasons but underlying them all was his hard heart.

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“So then,” Paul deduces, “it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy” (9:16). No one is saved unless God acts in his sovereign mercy. The correlation Paul is making is that just as God chose Jacob over Esau, so he chooses to save his elect not based on foreseen faith or works, not based on natural descent or merit, but only according to his mercy and by his grace. God said to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (9:15), and so he has chosen to have mercy and compassion on those whom he foreknew and predestined, and those whom he predestined he called by his grace, and those whom he called he justified through faith in Christ, and those whom he justified he sanctifies, conforming us to the image of Christ, that one day we will be glorified like him (Rom. 8:29-30).

Such is included in the mysterious yet merciful purpose of God. It is indeed mysterious why God chose Jacob, or you, or me. And this truth should lead not to arrogance or indifference but humility and assurance: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-7). God’s mercy to us then is not an end in itself but has a greater purpose.

What is this mysterious yet merciful purpose of God? Paul gives us several clues. First, Paul says that God chose Jacob not Esau, “in order that God’s purpose might continue, not because of works but *because of him who calls*” (9:11, emphasis added). In other words, God does what he purposes because he is God. Second, Paul says that God’s mercy “depends not on human will or exertion, but *on God, who has mercy*” (9:16, emphasis added). In other words, God shows mercy to whom he shows mercy because he is God. Third, Paul concludes, “[God] has mercy on whomever *he wills*, and he hardens whomever *he wills*” (9:18, emphasis added). In other words, God has mercy and hardens as he wills because he is God.

What we see in these verses, and throughout Scripture, is that God’s ultimate purpose in all that he does is *his glory*. Although our chief end may be to glorify God,<sup>2</sup> God’s chief end, so to speak, is to glorify himself. For example, every time we encounter God’s sovereign election in Scripture, it is revealed for us to behold our God in awe and respond with reverent worship. We are not told “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (9:13) for us to speculate whether our neighbor is one of the elect. We are not told that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world or predestined us for adoption (Eph. 1:4-5) for us to treat the lost and perishing with smug indifference. No, he chose us and predestined us “according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6).

So, when we consider the manifest purpose of Israel, and the mysterious purpose of election, and the merciful purpose of God, what else can we say but “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33)? Beloved, behold our God! “For from his and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

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<sup>2</sup> “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 1, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 355.