

Sovereignty . . . in the Nursery

Chosen...Before Time Began – Part III

Romans 9:6-13

Introduction

It is a rather alarming thing, to me, that people develop their views and beliefs from all kinds of sources.

There are thousands of people now, who believe that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and raised a family somewhere in France, because a novel entitled *The Da Vinci Code* said so. People tend to forget the fact that the book is fiction, even though the author says in the front of the book that he has uncovered a conspiracy of secrecy among the worlds church leaders.

According to *World Magazine*, such TV shows and hosts as: *Saturday Night Live*, the *Daily Show*, Jay Leno, and David Letterman, are taken seriously by one out of every five thirty year olds or younger. In one study, research was conducted to determine the ways people obtain political news and develop their own viewpoint. Evidently, comedy TV is the source for hundreds of thousands of young people who take comedy seriously.

More seriously than either of these illustrations is a recent survey by the Barna Research Group. The survey uncovered a rising number of denominational leaders and pastors who can no longer sign on to the following basic affirmations:

- there is absolute moral truth (in other words, some things are morally wrong, no matter who you are or where you live);
- the Bible is the accurate word of God.

Believe it or not, the leading conservative denomination, the Southern Baptists, revealed that

only 71% of its pastors and leaders would agree with the above statements; while 27% of the Methodists, which was the fewest number, would agree.

This is surprising news – not so much that only one out of four liberal pastors believe the Bible is telling the truth, but that one out of four conservative Baptist pastors do not believe it. That means literally millions of believers get their news and develop their concept of God and the world from leaders who think the Bible is part truth and part fiction.

That is much more disturbing than twenty-five year olds developing their political perspective from David Letterman. Although that is kind of scary too!

So, it was not surprising to read, as this article concluded, that only one out of ten Protestants who were polled, would agree that there is absolute moral truth and that the Bible is the word of God.¹

My friend, if the Bible is not the word of God, then we do not know who God is. And, if people are developing their perspective of who God is apart from an examination of the Bible, there is little wonder why so many strange views about God exist, even among those who call themselves Christians.

No wonder the basic truths about God, His world, His character, His commands, and His moral parameters are being rewritten. No wonder God is no longer recognizable when compared with scripture.

If you talk to people on the street or in the work force today, and ask them who God is, you will get an earful of convoluted, diluted, distorted definitions of a God who does not exist in scripture. And, these same people will say they are Christians!

Someone wrote, “God created man in His own image, and modern man repaid the favor.”

A. W. Tozer wrote,

*Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we would be able to predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.*ⁱⁱ

Who is God? Your answer will determine more about you than about God.

Someone might say, “Why bother?”

J. I. Packer warned his generation,

*Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Tozer adds this directive,

If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is.^{iv}

My friend, the only way to think of God more nearly as He is, is to study what His word says He is. Furthermore, it is impossible to believe in God apart from word, for the word of God explains to us the gospel of God.

That is why Paul would write, in Romans, chapter 10, verse 17,

. . . faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.

A few verses earlier, verses 13 and 14, Paul writes,

. . . “Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?

In other words, saving faith requires the articulation of biblical truth.

So, if people think the Bible is fiction and not truth, the devil has won a major battle. If the Bible is fiction, the plan of salvation is anyone’s guess. Whether or not there is a hell or heaven is up for grabs too! And, most importantly, just who God is, is now up to anyone’s imagination.

No wonder our generation has fulfilled the warning of Tozer, who said that if you disregard the study of God – through scripture – you sentence

yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction.

I have said all of this because we will begin to study a description of God that runs counter to the heart and logic and reason of mankind. We are about to study who God is, in terms that might make us feel uncomfortable – unless we believe it, and then our hearts will soar with this incredible truth.

The theme of Romans, chapter 9, could be stated in one word, *sovereignty*. While the nation Israel is the obvious subject matter, in between the lines and sometimes boldly stated, the real subject matter is the sovereignty of God.

Most of us would say we believe in the sovereignty of God, so let me get even more specific and say that the theme of Romans, chapter 9, is, *the sovereignty of God in election*.

I am sure I have your attention now!

In the next paragraph in our study of Romans, chapter 9, Paul will describe *who God is*, with statements that on one hand seem shocking, yet on the other hand, are reassuring.

In this paragraph, Paul is going to describe God’s sovereignty with two illustrations from Israel’s past. They include:

1. The supernatural conception of Isaac;
2. The sovereign election of Jacob.

Look at Romans, chapter 9, verses 6 through 13.

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 is 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.”

Paul begins by saying that the rejection of the Messiah by the nation of Israel does not mean the word of God has failed. He then reminds them that true Israelites are not born, they are born again.

Paul reiterated this truth in his letter to the Galatians. In chapter 3, verse 29, he wrote,

. . . if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.

The promise!

Now, all Israel did not believe, did they? The nation at large, rejected Christ. Only a few believed at first. So, does that mean the promise of God to call out His people failed? Did the word of God fail?

Well, in this paragraph, Paul will prove from Israel’s own history that while all the nation did not believe, God has been working within the nation all along, to call out – to elect – those who will become true Israel.

The Supernatural Conception of Isaac

Paul goes all the way back to the beginning of the nation Israel to show that God is sovereign in His choosing and that His purposes have not failed.

Abraham

- Paul begins by mentioning Abraham in verse 7 of Romans, chapter 9.

The Jews knew their history. Abraham did not seek God. He was a member of a pagan, idolatrous family. But even though Abraham was not seeking God, God was seeking Abraham. Since the call of Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12, every Jew reading the letter of Romans would have to confess that Jewish history began with God choosing Abraham.

The nation Israel began by the election of Abraham – a man called out by God.

Isaac

- Then Paul moves to Isaac, the son of Abraham.

If Isaac is not proof of God’s sovereign power, nothing is. Look at verse 9 of Romans, chapter 9.

For this is a word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.”

The Jewish nation could not ignore the fact that the very conception of Isaac in his mother’s womb occurred in spite of a couple of things. Let me give them to you.

Isaac’s conception occurred in spite of physical impossibilities

- Isaac’s conception occurred in spite of physical impossibilities.

Genesis records that Sarah was barren (Genesis 11:30), past the age of childbearing (Genesis 18:11), and in addition, she was ninety years old (Genesis 17:17).

She conceives and bears a son. Why? Because God had made a promise. And God was sovereignly capable of keeping His promise, even though it was a physical impossibility.

Isaac’s conception occurred in spite of faithless attitudes

- The conception of Isaac occurred in spite of physical impossibilities, and even more importantly, in spite of faithless attitudes.

Let us go back to this story and see the sovereignty of God at work in spite of unbelief.

Turn to Genesis, chapter 16, and let me set the stage for you. It has been at least ten years since God’s promise to Abram that his descendants will outnumber the stars. You can only imagine Abram’s anticipation.

Abram’s name, before it was changed by God, meant “illustrious father”. Imagine people visiting Abram and introducing themselves. Hebrew names were very indicative of what they had or did, so they would ask, “And what is your name?”

He would say, “My name is ‘illustrious Father’.”

They would respond, “Oh, you must be so proud to be a father!”

Abram would perhaps hang his head and kick the dirt, as he said, “Well, no, I don’t have any children.”

For years, he probably added the word, “yet” – “I don’t have any children yet . . . but God has promised!”

Well, by the time you reach Genesis, chapter 16, Abram has stopped saying, “yet”. Both he and Sarah had become vulnerable to the temptation to take matters into their own hands. When you doubt the sovereignty of God, you instigate the sovereignty of you.

What happens when we doubt the sovereignty of God and instigate the “sovereignty of ourselves”

As we go through this story, rather quickly, I want to pull out several practical things that occur when any one of us, regarding anything in life, take matters into our own hands.

We rationalize our resentment

1. The first thing that happens; that sort of sets the stage for compromise at best, and utter rebellion at worst, is that we rationalize our resentment.

Notice verses 1 through 3 of Genesis, chapter 16.

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, “Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her.” And Abram . . .

(. . . responded as the godly leader in the home, “No, Sarai, we must wait on the promise of God.” – that is from the “If only” translation. No, the text reads, “And Abram . . .),

. . . listened to the voice of Sarai. After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram’s wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.

The nation Israel has not gotten past one generation, and the enemy has already succeeded in corrupting the promise.

Did you notice the way Sarai began in verse 2?

. . . behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. . . .

Theologically she is half right. Conception is according to the work and purpose of God; it is the creation of an immortal soul. From a human perspective, it can be an accident, a difficulty, or a tragedy, but it cannot happen without God’s sovereign purpose to bring to life a never ending soul.

For conception to occur requires the purpose of God; for it not to occur also requires the purpose of God. Medical and physical conditions may seem to be the primary cause of either fertility or sterility, but behind those conditions is the primary Sovereign who fulfills His purpose.

Rather than trust in the purposes of a sovereign God, Sarai turns bitter – resentful toward God. She says, in effect, “God has messed up my life. God is in the way of what I want.”

In addition, she takes matters into her own hands and decides that another wife who can bear children is better than one wife who cannot. The enemy is wringing his hands with glee. He will corrupt the nation to be; he will nullify the promise of God.

By the way, you know you are taking matters into your own hands when you begin to refuse to live by God’s prohibitions and wait for God’s purposes.

Sarai said, “God has not come through. It’s been thirteen years now and God must need my help. It’s time to institute plan B.”

That might sound good, but it is nothing more than religious sounding rationalization of rebellion.

Perhaps right now, you are rationalizing rebellion:

- in your business, while thinking, “God won’t mind.”
- in your personal, private life, while thinking, “Surely God wants my needs to be met. I’ve never been happier. Surely God wants me to be happy.”
- in the secret world of your imagination, while thinking, “At least I’m not acting on anything; at least it isn’t hurting anyone. Surely God is pleased with my self-restraint.”

Sarai uses spiritual words, but she is merely acting out her rebellion against God. And she gives ungodly advice to her husband and Abram accepts the role in his own rebellion against the promise of God.

We ruin personal relationships

2. Secondly, when you take matters into your own hands, you not only rationalize your resentment, but you ruin personal relationships.

Notice verse 4 of Genesis, chapter 16.

He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight.

At least three relationships would be profoundly affected by this rebellion. The relationship between:

- Sarai and Hagar – a bitter rivalry;
- Sarai and Hagar's sons – Isaac, the father of the Jewish nation; Ishmael, the father of Arab nations (and the descendants of these two boys, by the way, are still fighting over the piece of land that we call the Holy Land, with both sides claiming Abraham as their father and both claiming the right to own it all);
- Sarai and Abram – suffered. Notice verse 5.

And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. . . ."

In other words, "Abram, this is all your fault."

In a way, this was Abram's fault! He knew he was wrong. Sarai knew he was wrong. Hagar knew they were both wrong.

We have every reason to believe this nation Israel will never get to first base; it will never make it! And it would not have, except for the fact that God was sovereign.

We refuse to believe God's reassurances

3. There is one more thing that happens when we take matters into our own hands. We not only rationalize our rebellion with pious words; we not only ruin relationships, but we refuse to believe God's reassurances.

Notice verse 5 of Genesis, chapter 17. God speaks again to Abram, saying,

No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.

Imagine that! You are now ninety-nine years old, and God is changing your name from "illustrious father" to "father of a multitude"!

Notice verse 15.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name."

Sarah literally means, "princess". She received that name because, as verse 16 tells us,

. . . I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.

Continue to verse 17.

Then Abraham fell on his face and . . .

(. . . said, "Praise God . . . and he rose to his feet and began to sing, "Great is Thy faithfulness, Oh God my Father!" – no, that is the "If only" version again! The text says,)

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

When you take matters into your own hands, this book of reassurances, this Bible will seem foolish.

When Sarah heard the news, she laughed also. Look at chapter 18, verses 13 and 14a.

And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is anything too difficult for the Lord? . . ."

In other words, "Your problem, Abraham, is that you don't understand sovereignty."

God brought Abraham and Sarah past the childbearing age, so they could not take credit for the beginning of this Jewish nation. It would be clear that it was His power and His purpose and His sovereignty over the affairs of mankind.

The sovereignty of God manifests itself – even in the nursery! He determines conception, the life that will be born, the kind of person, the physical make-up of that person knit together in the womb, the timing of that birth, the generation and family and nation into which that child will be born.

He chose that you would live, where you would live, when you would live, to whom you would be born – yes, God chose your mother! Mom, He chose and determined everything about your child, including the very timing of their birth.

Notice verse 14b of Genesis, chapter 18.

At the appointed time I [God] will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.

Did this mean that Abraham and Sarah would not have to get together? Would there not be egg and sperm? Would there not be nine months of growth? There would be all of that, but these are secondary issues to the primary cause who is sovereign God.

Paul says in Romans, chapter 9, that the very fact that the nation even exists was as a result of this inconceivable conception (what irony!) – by a mother and father who had to use their walkers to even go to visit the nursery.

Ah, the sovereign choice of God, lying in that nursery.

The Sovereign Election of Jacob

Now, back in Romans, chapter 9, Paul anticipated Jewish readers saying, “Yes, but Isaac wasn’t a difficult choice for God to make over Ishmael – even though Ishmael was Abraham’s first born son, Isaac was the only son of both Abraham and Sarah.”

So Paul gives another illustration of God’s sovereignty. Not only is His sovereignty seen in the supernatural conception of Isaac, but in the sovereign election of Jacob.

Notice verses 10 and 11.

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 . . .

(that word is “eklektos,” which gives us our word, “election”),

. . . would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,

It is one thing for God to elect Isaac over Ishmael – Isaac was the only one born to both Abraham and Sarah – but here are twins. They have the same Jewish parents and both are pure-blooded Jews. God makes a choice and His choice is significant for several reasons:

- First, God chooses the second born twin.

In other words, He goes against the normal standard of blessing the first born.

- Secondly, the choice is made before they are even born.

Paul specifically states that this was done so that God’s electing purpose might be irrefutably taught.

- Thirdly, the choice is made independent of merit.

The text says, “Neither one had yet done anything good or bad.”

Skip to verse 13b,

. . . Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.

In other words, “Jacob is the one I have chosen, and Esau is the one I have rejected.”

Jacob’s election occurred:

- before his birth;
- in spite of his behavior (study his life and see for yourself!).

A woman came up to Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher of the nineteenth century, and said, “I don’t understand how God could say He hated Esau.”

Spurgeon responded, “Madam, I find it more difficult to understand how He could love Jacob.”

“Jacob I have chosen, Esau I have rejected.”

Does this raise a thousand questions? Yes!

However, I would rather have a God described in scripture, who provokes a thousand questions, than the imaginary God of our generation, who barely provokes a yawn.

When you read that verse, immediately you want to say, “That’s not fair!”

That is exactly what Paul knew you would say, so he goes on in verse 14, to write,

. . . There is no injustice with God, is there? . . .

(in other words, “You’re not suggesting He isn’t fair, are you?”),

. . . May it never be!

What does Paul mean by that? We will start with that in our next discussion.

Conclusion

Let me give you two closing thoughts.

Election is intended by God to be reassuring

1. First, talk of election usually focuses on the negative, when it was intended by God to be reassuring.

Paul is attempting to reassure the nation of God’s providence and power – and election was his proof for both.

Election has amazing, positive implications

2. Secondly, the negative questions about election often cloud the amazing, positive implications of this doctrine.

For example:

- You are here, on planet earth, by God's appointment.
- You were born into your family and into this generation by God's timing.
- You were made with strengths and weaknesses to glorify God's grace and sufficiency.
- You are even now, under God's determined plan of training and pruning and conforming.
- You are experiencing events and circumstances according to His perfect timing and wise purposes.

This is true no matter what you are facing; no matter where you are; no matter who you are; no matter where you have been . . .

This is the kind of God that is described in this Bible, which is not fiction – it is the truth.

Do not take matters into your own hands, surrender to His sovereign hand.

Raymond Edman wrote,

God brought you here, it is by His will that you are in this place – in that fact, rest. He will keep you here in His love, and give you the grace to behave as His child; He will make the trials lessons which He intends for you to learn, and He will work in you the grace He means to bestow; and in His good

time, He will bring you out again – how and when He alone knows.^v

That is another way of saying, “God is sovereign.”

There is a widow of many years in our church family. She is a woman greatly used by God. She is brilliant, educated, gifted, and was once the wife of a man of God who was a scholar, author, and influential leader. You would never know these things, as she would never tell you. Every time I see her and ask, “How's it going?” – she smiles and says, as a matter fact, “God is on the throne.”

God is on the throne.

We will never answer all the questions related to election and God's sovereignty over the affairs of mankind. We will have fun trying, but we will not do it.

We will close with this – the God who is described in this Book is a sovereign King. And, we echo the book of Job, chapter 11, verses 7 and 8a,

Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens, what can you do? . . .

What can we do? We can believe this description and bow, saying, “God is on the throne.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/9/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ World Magazine (Jan. 24, 2004), p. 11; (February 2, 2004), p. 25.

ⁱⁱ Robert J. Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories (Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 350.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid..

^{iv} Ibid..

^v Charles Swindoll, The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Nashville, TN, Word Publishing, 1998), p. 244.