

“Election Difficulties”

Romans 9:6-16 ¹

As I’m sure you know, Tuesday is Election Day, 2015, and, while this is an off-year election cycle, the 2016 Presidential campaigns are already well underway. You probably know that to “elect” means to “choose or to make a decision,” and so an “election” is a formal decision-making process by which persons are chosen for offices both public and private.

Choosing leaders through elections rather than through assassinations and revolutions is actually a rather recent concept among humankind, dating for the most part to the seventeenth century; and free elections are still unknown in many parts of the world. The routinely low turnout for most elections in our country demonstrates how little we understand or appreciate what we’ve received at the price of blood . . . and I’m afraid that our failures of understanding and involvement put us in some danger of tyranny in the future.

You may also know that the idea of “election” has significance for our faith as well as for political realities. The Greek word for “election” (εκλογη) appears six times in the Bible, ² and it’s worth noting that the word comes from the same root as the verb “to call” (καλεω; κλησις), as in “to call to salvation.”

Five of the six instances of “election” in the New Testament are in the writings of Paul. Four of them are in Romans, and one is in this morning’s text. I don’t usually ask you to think as hard on Sunday morning as I’m going to ask you to do this morning, so I hope you’ll stick with me!

Our text this morning is perhaps the most difficult passage in the New Testament with respect to what Christians understand the Bible to say about the Jewish people today. I will add a couple of pages of additional information to the online version of the sermon that gives more insight into how contemporary Jews understand these things, and my good friend, Rabbi Bernstein, was kind enough to read the whole thing. He affirms that, while we certainly understand things differently, I’ve been fair to both perspectives. So here we go

In the New International Version (NIV), Romans 9:10-13 goes like this: “*Not only that, but Rebekah’s children were conceived at the same time by 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.’*”

Well, this is awkward. These sentences don’t have a “good feel” about them, and thus I have called this sermon, “Election Difficulties.” But things get harder than this.

Closely related to “**election**” is the idea of “**predestination**” (προοριζω), which appears five times in the New Testament.³ Paul wrote these words in Romans 8:29-30: “*For those God foreknew he also **predestined** to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he **predestined**, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 1, 2015, All Saints’ Day.

² Romans 9:11, 11:5, 7, 28; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Peter 1:10

³ Acts 4:28; Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:5, 11. Many English translations today render προοριζω with some form of the verb “to foreknow.”

Bill Hendricks, one of the most brilliant theologians Southern Baptists ever produced, wrote of these texts that “In a discussion of election and predestination, questions about Jacob and Esau (Romans 9:13) [naturally] arise, as do questions about God ‘hardening Pharaoh’s heart’ (Romans 9:17-18). These verses could be interpreted to mean that God had planned things out beforehand without any regard for human response.

“The worst scenario would suggest that God had taken a nice young Egyptian prince and turned him into a monster. Romans 9:13 could mean that God really hated Esau and played favorites among his children. . . . A better interpretation of these passages,” Bill wrote, “is to say that God used what Esau and Pharaoh had become. Esau, a compulsive man who sought instant gratification of his desires, would not be the kind of person who becomes a patriarch. Pharaoh, a ruthless man, God confirmed and judged as an oppressor. . . . [but] *In the last analysis, the way in which God’s guidance of his creation interfaces with human freedom is unknown to us.*”⁴

To a substantial degree, I’m going to end up where Bill ended in that last sentence—“**in the last analysis, the way in which God’s guidance of his creation interfaces with human freedom is unknown to us**”—but we can’t quit so easily. There’s work to be done on the way to that conclusion.

The letter to the church at Rome is Paul’s most closely-reasoned presentation of his faith, and today’s text falls within one of the more difficult parts of the letter. While we’ll give brief attention to Jacob, Esau, and Pharaoh, Paul’s main subject in Romans 9-11 has to do with God’s purposes for the nation of Israel, “God’s chosen people.”

Paul’s concern in Romans 9-11 is not about the political nation of Israel as it existed then or as it exists today. Paul’s struggle in this passage has to do with God’s “election” of Israel and with the future of the ethnic Jews, of whom he himself was one, who have from that day to this largely rejected Jesus of Nazareth’s claim to be their promised Messiah.

Could it possibly be, Paul wondered, that the heirs to God’s covenant with Abraham, the chosen nation rescued through the Red Sea, given the Law at Sinai and brought back home from Babylon, would find themselves in the end outside God’s salvation? On the one hand, that was exactly how Paul understood the exclusive claims of Jesus; but on the other, he couldn’t bring himself to believe that God’s promises to ethnic Israel would fail.

After all, when Paul began to write what we know as Romans 9, he had just finished writing these words: “*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:38-39). If God’s promises to Abraham’s heirs were somehow to fail, what reason would remain to believe that these later promises would be trustworthy? The question was not a small one.

Some say today that God’s promises to Israel and to the Church are parallel covenants, not mutually-exclusive ones, and that Jews and Christians should coexist without trying to convert one another. But Paul didn’t believe that for a moment, however much he might have wanted to. If Paul had believed that Jews were going to be saved through their kinship with Abraham, he wouldn’t have worked so hard and suffered so much to persuade his kinspeople that Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and resurrected, was their long-promised Messiah.

⁴ Bill Hendricks, “Predestination,” *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991).

It was, after all, in conversation with a committed “Son of Abraham” that Jesus Himself said, *“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again”* (John 3:3). And would Paul have fervently written that *“my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved”* (Romans 10:1) if he saw any way for them to be saved except through Jesus? (Romans 10:2-4). Would Peter and John have told the religious leaders in Jerusalem that *“Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12)?

Whatever we may wish the text said, and whatever we may think about it, the New Testament never wavers on this matter, and though Paul himself wrote some of the difficult passages, he still struggled mightily with these concerns when he thought about the destiny of his people.⁵ Paul always went to the local Jewish synagogue first in every city he visited, but only a few ever accepted his message.⁶ Let’s look briefly at the book of Romans to see if we can grasp the trajectory of Paul’s argument as he wrestled toward a conclusion.

In Romans 7, Paul had written about God’s Law, noting that the Law functions much like a “Wet Paint” sign, awakening urges that might have remained latent and unfulfilled were the sign not there. Paul concluded that while the Law itself is good, conforming to the way things really are and to the way the universe really works, the Law also condemns us as it makes us aware of darkness within that we are powerless to remove. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously observed, “The line separating good and evil runs through every human heart.”⁷

Dale Moody, another of our best Baptist theologians, wrote about today’s text that “God’s word to Pharaoh through Moses had the same effect as the Law. The Law brought to consciousness sin already there, and God’s word to Pharaoh brought out a hardness of heart already present. The sun that hardens the clay melts the butter.”⁸ The difference is in the character of the recipient.⁹

When Paul came to the idea of “hardening of heart” in Romans 9, he used the word *σκληρυνει* (9:18). We get our word “sclerosis” from the same root, and we know that when the pathological hardening and stiffening of sclerosis takes place in our own arteries, it’s usually the result of choices we ourselves have made. That’s what Paul understood had happened to Pharaoh, and that’s the New Testament’s understanding of those who reject God’s salvation through Jesus, whether in Paul’s time or in our own.

When it came to the matter of Jacob and Esau in our text—*“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”* (9:13)—“hatred” in the ordinary sense can hardly be meant, since God blessed Esau in many ways during the remainder of his life. Rather, this “hatred” is surely a metaphor pointing out that Esau was not the Son of Promise through whom God’s covenant with Abraham would be fulfilled. Jesus used the very same metaphor in Luke 14:26 when He spoke of “hatred” for one’s

⁵ See www.mjaa.org, the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America; also www.jewsforjesus.org.

⁶ See also Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004; copyright held by Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, Rome, Italy).

⁷ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Gulag_Archipelago

⁸ Dale Moody, “Romans,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), p. 230.

⁹ Paul had already described the situation of Pharaoh and of other unbelievers at the beginning of this letter: *“They knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. . . . As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. . . . Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done”* (Romans 1:18-28).

own life and one's own family when such commitments are compared with our commitment to Him.¹⁰

Paul ended Romans 9 with these words: *“What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. . . . For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. **Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.** Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes”* (Romans 9:30-10:3).¹¹

Paul announced his conclusion to all these ponderings in chapter 11: *“Again I ask: Did they [that is, Israel,] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring?”*

*“I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. . . . I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: **Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved**”* (Romans 11:11-14, 25-26a).

When Paul wrote that *“all Israel will be saved,”* he did not mean that every ethnic Jew would be saved, because he had already made that very clear in 9:6-13. Nor was he referring to a “spiritual Israel” by which Christians, both Jew and Gentile, have replaced or superseded ethnic Israel in God's purposes, because he had made that clear in 11:13-24.

Taking all this together, most scholars believe that **Paul expected a great harvest of souls from ethnic Israel in the last days**—if not actually all of Israel, then at least the majority of Israel would then acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah. Paul may even have sensed a certain parallel between his own conversion and what would eventually happen with his people as a whole. The Risen Jesus had revealed Himself to Paul directly on the Damascus Road, sweeping away his rationalizations and his self-righteousness; and in the last days, Paul believed that the same thing would happen for many of the children of Israel.¹²

So, after all this, the question for us now becomes, **“So what?”** What does all this arcane theological contemplation about ‘election difficulties’ have to do with my life today?” Those are excellent and essential questions, and I'll respond to them, though briefly. I suggest that there are at least five “So What's” here:

¹⁰ Jesus clearly told us to *“love our neighbors as we love ourselves”* and to *“honor our fathers and mothers”* (Mark 12:31, 10:19), so His point about “hatred” was to say that everything else, no matter how important, has to be put out of consideration when we make the choice to follow Him. He tolerates no contenders for the central place in our allegiance and affection (Matthew 6:33).

¹¹ Rabbi Michael J. Cook has commented extensively on these claims, and some of his responses are appended to this sermon. See Michael J. Cook, *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-Being in a Christian Environment* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012).

¹² Such a salvation of Israel at the end of history would fulfill Paul's expectations in Romans 9-11. Such a salvation would accord with the climactic nature of Paul's argument in these chapters, would certainly qualify as the mystery of which he spoke in 11:25; and it would demonstrate God's faithfulness to fulfill His saving promises to the chosen people (9:6). *English Standard Version Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), p. 2177.

1. With respect to Esau and Pharaoh, we need to hear God’s warning that if we persist in turning a deaf ear to the Spirit’s call (καλεω; κλησις), there will come a time when we’re no longer able to hear or to recognize the Spirit’s voice at all. Sclerosis of the spirit will send us into a Darkness from which there is no return.
2. With respect to those who currently are unreceptive to the Gospel, we need to beware of judging who will eventually respond to the Good News and who will not. You and I are not responsible for the harvest—that is the Spirit’s work—but we are responsible for sowing the seed that will lead to the harvest, for sharing the forgiveness, purpose, joy, and Hope that we have found in Jesus.
3. With respect to Paul’s passion for his people, we need to ask ourselves how concerned we really are for those around us and around our world who do not know Jesus today. Are you willing to sacrifice your time, money, energy, comfort and safety to see persons all over this planet come to faith in Jesus? Am I?
4. With respect to God’s faithfulness, our study this morning has reaffirmed the Bible’s consistent claim from one end to the other that every one of God’s promises is certain to be fulfilled, and history will demonstrate this in the end (2 Corinthians 1:20).
5. Finally, we need to remember that it was Israel’s zeal for God that was their greatest barrier to finding God. Absorbed in their efforts to earn salvation through their own piety, they didn’t recognize in Jesus the sure Source and Goal for their faith, and they refused to submit themselves to the free gift of God’s righteousness that comes only through Jesus.¹³

And, rather than “looking down our noses” at others, you and I will do well to recognize that *the more faithfully we attempt to follow Jesus, the more danger we face of secretly thinking that God chose us for salvation because we somehow deserved it—which is never, ever the case. **Salvation is always and forever by God’s grace alone*** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Before we close, let me repeat once more Bill Hendricks’ conclusion about “election”: **“In the last analysis, the way in which God’s guidance of His creation interfaces with human freedom is unknown to us.”** Timothy George, Dean of Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School, wrapped up his own discussion of “election difficulties” with these words: “We are not able to understand how everything the Bible says about election fits into a neat logical system. Our business is not to pry into the secret counsels of God but to share the message of salvation with everyone and to be grateful that we [ourselves] have been delivered from darkness into light.

. . .

“The proper response to election is not pride but gratitude for God’s amazing grace that saves eternally. Election . . . is neither a steeple from which we look in judgment on others nor a pillow to sleep on. It is rather a stronghold in time of trial and a confession of praise to God’s grace and to His glory!”¹⁴

That’s how Paul ended his discussion in Romans 9-11, too, with an exclamation of praise to God:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?

¹³ Everett Harrison, “Romans,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, digital version).

¹⁴ Timothy George, “Election,” *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991).

For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen
(Romans 11:33-36).

Let your glory fall, Lord.

Let your glory fall!

Excerpts from Michael J. Cook, *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-Being in a Christian Environment* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012).

Christians and Jews obviously understand what God is up to in the world in very different ways, and we do well to take one another's differing perspectives seriously so that we might learn from one another. While I greatly appreciate the tone and goal of Rabbi Cook's work, note below that while he argues for Jews to be able to interpret their own texts, a claim with which one might empathize, from a Christian perspective it seems to me that he also illustrates Paul's claim that "*I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness*" (Romans 10:2-3).

The way this seems to me to operate here is that Rabbi Cook repeatedly shifts the origin of the idea and definition of a "Messiah" from God to the Jewish people themselves, making the idea of a "Messiah" something that Jews created and define (and, it would seem, *control*) rather than God's own chosen Redeemer, whose character and purpose come from God, not from humankind. . . .

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"In terms of its own redemption need, ancient Judaism envisioned the Messiah as a restored human king in Jerusalem, likely descended from King David, preoccupied with the entire people (not individuals), and a strong leader who will vindicate God and demonstrating the political, military, and economic freedom and strength of God's People by overthrowing Israel's foreign oppressors, fulfilling biblical prophecies as *Jews* interpret them, and ushering in God's kingdom. . . . No substitute agenda – together with any delay needed to accomplish it – is relevant for Jews in identifying the Messiah (e.g., forgiving sins or dying to atone for the sins of others, such as those of Adam, or rising from the dead as confirmation of believers' salvation). . . . Such a figure would have been incomprehensible to a first century Hebrew, and it is *not the Messiah concept that Jews originally formulated and have maintained ever since*" (p. xxi).

"Because Paul reverses the sequence for salvation, arguing now that the 'full number of Gentiles' must *precede* disbelieving Israel—and because he has the covenant skip from Abraham to Christ, *with membership now restricted to those in Christ irrespective of whether they are Jewish ethnically* (Romans 9:6 ff.)—Jews will always recoil from his message, hearing it (as I frame it) essentially as:

The fulfillment that we Jews have sought has already occurred, but *you* disbelieving Jews are blind to the fulfillment of our heritage. We were chosen not because of merit. For election is not the result of anything people do to deserve it. Rather, it was accorded us by the free choice of God. But what cannot be won by merit can be forfeited by negligence, and indeed has been so forfeited by *you*. Gentiles, never pursuing righteousness, have attained it, whereas you, always pursuing it, have missed it altogether, failing to understand that righteousness is the status that God confers on those humbly receiving it through faith as God's gift, whereas—foolishly—you assume that righteousness is a kind of life you can attain based on obedience to the Law. [Apart from the attitude, this is indeed what Paul said.]

“When heard in this fashion, Paul is chastising fellow Jews for not accepting Christ as the fulfilment of a conceptual scheme that is foreign to them to begin with!<sup>15</sup> He views Christ as a type of dying and rising Greco-Roman Savior-deity, which sharply diverges from Judaism’s own understanding of the messianic role and agenda, whose contours simply do not involve bringing freedom from Sin (since persons can initiate their own reconciliation with God through repentance).<sup>16</sup> Not only has Paul universalized his own predicament by including Jews under an umbrella where they certainly do not feel that they belong, but he has also failed to grasp the reality that what he construes to be the Jews’ blindness they consider clear-sightedness—since no evidences that *Jews* expect to herald the arrival of the Messiah are yet manifest!” (pp. 172-173).

*“It should be starkly stated that even if the Jewish Bible undeniably did identify any individual as the Messiah, modern Jews need feel no compulsion to accept that person anyway [italics added]. . . . ‘Messiah’ (from Hebrew) is a Jewish concept that, today, has come to mean God’s agent who brings an end to war, famine, disease, discrimination, and suffering. Since these ills still afflict our society, Jews cannot accept any historical figure (including Jesus) as the Messiah. That ‘Christ’ (Greek for ‘Messiah’) is supposed to forgive sins or bring salvation is a Christian, not Jewish, idea—and it is one that redefines the Messiah’s agenda away from what Jews intended when they originated this concept”* (pp. 258-259; italics added in the last two lines).

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Most Christians would certainly agree with Rabbi Cook that Jesus of Nazareth was not the kind of Messiah that they expected. Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that *anybody* expected . . . or *wanted*, for that matter. Christians argue that the key to the whole matter is Jesus’ Resurrection, the central point of which is its validation of Jesus’ claims to be who He said He was, the Promised Redeemer sent from God.

The first disciples, including Jesus’ half-brother, James, all went to their deaths because they continued to affirm and refused to deny that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that *they themselves had seen Him*. Christians throughout the centuries have continued to affirm and to die for this claim, and I, too, know Him, communicate with Him through His Spirit, and serve Him.

Christians interpret the Scriptures, both Jewish and Christian, through the lens of their personal experience with the Risen Jesus.

¹⁵ Foreign to the Jews’ understanding, perhaps, but Christians would counter that it is not foreign to God’s own self-revelation of the coming Messiah, with the first hint of the nature of His coming and His redeeming work coming in Genesis 3:15 and in many places in the Hebrew scriptures thereafter.

¹⁶ But see Isaiah 63:6 *et passim*.