

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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8/9/26

Sermon Title: A Promise Failed?

Sermon Text: Romans 9:6-13

Rom. 9:6 ¶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,

Rom. 9:7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”

Rom. 9:8 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.

Rom. 9:9 For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Rom. 9:10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,

Rom. 9:11 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—

Rom. 9:12 she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”

Rom. 9:13 As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Main Point: The promise that God made to Abraham has been kept, since being a child of Abraham relates not to blood and soil, but to Spirit and promise.

Outline:

1. A Promise Made

- 2. A Promise of Faith
- 3. A Promised People

Introduction

Think for a moment about a time someone broke a promise to you. Maybe it was a parent who didn't show up, or a boss who promised a promotion that never came, or a spouse who walked away. Those things are painful. And when a promise fails, it does two things: it breaks your heart, and it destroys your trust in the person who made it.

Last week, we ended Romans 8 on the highest mountain peak in the Bible—Paul told us that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God. But as we turn the page to chapter 9, it's like we hit a brick wall. An astute reader in Rome might look at that peak and then look at the Jewish people and say:

“Wait a minute. God made them the ultimate promise. He said He'd be their God forever. And yet, look at them—most are currently outside of Christ. If God's promise to them didn't work, why should I believe the promises at the end of chapter 8 will work for me?”

That is not an unfair question. See, this is why Paul is in so much distress. If the Jewish people received these promises but refuse to follow the Messiah, does that mean that God's promises are flimsy? Are they failing? And if so, what does that say about God Himself? It would seem to call His very character into question.

This is the question that's going to occupy Paul for the next three chapters: How has God kept His promises if the Jewish people have not, for the most part, come to Christ? Paul's answer is going to have a lot to it, but fundamentally he's going to say, “No, these don't call God's promises or His character into question.”

How is that the case? Well Paul begins first of all by redefining the scope of the promise. Second, he distinguishes the administration of the covenant. Then third, he answers the objection by grounding God's covenant in sovereign election.

1. A Promise Made

Paul begins first this morning by defending the integrity of God's Word.

He says in verse 6, "It is not as though the word of God has failed." The word he uses for "failed" suggests a ship running off course or an arrow missing its mark.

The critics Paul is giving voice to here were basically saying, If the majority of the Jews have been rejected, then God must have missed His target. God failed. His promise failed. What an incredible charge. You can see why Paul would feel the need to spend several chapters answering this.

So what Paul does is, he looks at the history of the patriarchs all the way back in Genesis and argues that God truly did not miss. Instead, he explains that his critics misunderstood what God was aiming at from the very beginning.

To show us, Paul takes us back to the family tree in verse 7. He reminds us of the moment in Genesis 21:12 when God told Abraham, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." We need to consider the weight of that statement. Abraham had two biological sons. He had Isaac, yes, but had another son, Ishmael. Ishmael was the firstborn, he was circumcised, and he was a biological descendant through Hagar (not Sarah). According to the flesh, Ishmael had every right to the inheritance. And yet God sovereignly named the promise to Isaac alone.

Paul is drawing on this moment in redemptive history because he wants us to see that he's not just making things up. He's not innovating. He is a faithful interpreter of Scripture. And what he's showing is that right here, at the very beginning of the Bible, God was already drawing a distinction. He was already establishing that being a child of the flesh is not necessarily the same thing as being a child of the promise. That's Ishmael. First born. Good candidate. The biology is his. The promise isn't his.

So what we see is that while the promise is a general pledge to a physical race of people. But even more deeply, it is a promise of spiritual life to a chosen remnant.

If God had just promised Abraham that every biological descendant would be saved, then the promise really would have failed the moment the first Israelite fell into unbelief. But because God is making a deeper spiritual promise of salvation through faith in the coming Messiah, the promise does not and cannot fail.

If you misunderstand what God's target always was, you are bound to be confused by the question of whether or not God has kept His word here.

Paul concludes this section in verse 6 with the rule that explains the history of the world: "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." God isn't ultimately interested in ethnicity. He continues to care about the Jewish people, and Paul continues to speak of the ethnic people of Israel throughout his letter to the Romans. But ethnicity alone is not enough to make someone a true Israelite down to the level of the heart. Otherwise, Ishmael would be as much a child of promise as Isaac was. If you grasp this, then you'll be ready to keep following Paul's whole argument.

What do you need to grasp? That ethnicity is not the means by which we take hold of the promises of God.

This leads us to our second point: How do we tell the difference between these two groups? It comes down to a Promise of Faith.

2. A Promise of Faith (rather than ceremonies or birth)

This is the second way that Paul answers the question of whether God's word has failed: by reminding us that God's promise is a promise of faith.

God's dealings with the nation of Israel always operated on at least two levels: an external administration and an internal grace.

Look at verse 8 of our passage:

"It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."

So here are the two levels Paul is talking about: while the "Israel of the flesh" receives the external privileges—the law, the worship, and the signs like circumcision—but these aren't automatically saving. In fact, someone can be a child of the flesh, and Jesus can also call them sons of Satan! So just because you have the right ceremonies and the right parents and all that doesn't save you.

Only the “children of the promise” have the internal grace. This means that when a “child of the flesh” rejects Christ, God’s word hasn’t failed, because that person was never the intended “child of promise” to begin with.

[Ingrafting, Not Replacement] And as Paul is saying this, notice that Paul is not “starting over” or building a “Plan B” church to replace a failed “Plan A” Israel. Paul’s idea for thinking about this is not replacement; it is continuity. Paul’s framework for the relationship between the Church and ethnic Israel is not “replacement.” That is not a biblical term. The term for what Paul describes is “ingrafting.” The way Paul puts it in Romans 11 is, we are wild shoots grafted into the “nourishing root” of the olive tree that is Israel. We as Gentiles are ingrafted into Israel.

We might be tempted to resolve any tension by saying, “Well, now there’s *no* difference between Israel and the church,” or to say that there is an “irreconcilable difference between Israel and the church.”

That would mean one of two extremes.

One extreme would be to say that the Church completely replaces Israel (this is sometimes called “Replacement Theology”). Yet that would deny Paul’s illustration of ingrafting, and it really would play into the hands of the critics who say that the promise failed. (It’s almost an admission that God’s promise failed, so we need to start over.)

The other extreme would be to see that the Church and Israel are kept so separate that they have different paths to God (a kind of extreme two Covenant Theology). You see hints of this with different modernist theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr or Krister Stendahl, who said that we shouldn’t even evangelize the Jews. You also see a version of this with TV preachers like John Hagee who intentionally don’t try to evangelize the Jewish people.

But *this* extreme would mean ignoring the whole argument of the first half of Romans, where we’re all in the same boat whether we’re Jews or Gentiles. And instead you would have to say that there really is something magical or special about being the descendant of the right person. At its worst, both extremes would imply that we shouldn’t even evangelize the Jews – either because they’re a lost

cause, or because they are on their own path to salvation. Neither of these is faithful to Scripture.

Paul is vigorously arguing that God's ingrafting of Gentiles into Israel is not a change of course from what God was doing before. This has always been "Plan A": a people of promise built upon faith in the coming Messiah. There are not two churches—one by flesh and another by promise—but one "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16) spanning all of history. The Church is perpetual; the Gentiles have simply become the long-awaited expansion of the church that was always promised.

[The Internal Reality] Now, I did mention this distinction Paul makes between the Israel of the flesh and the Israel of the Promise. How do these two "Israels" differ in daily life? Here is how Peter Martyr says it:

"The children of the flesh seek to establish their own righteousness through the works of the law. Yet the children of the promise depend entirely upon the free mercy of God."

The "Israel of the flesh" is content with the external observations—the ceremonies, the heritage, and the biological lineage. They use the Law as a ladder, to climb higher. But the "Israel of the Promise" sees the Law as a mirror that drives them to the Messiah. Here's what's helpful about how Paul distinguishes these "Israels" here. It proves that the word of God hasn't failed; instead, it's actually successfully reaching every person for whom it was always sovereignly intended. A people of promise, not flesh.

Please don't make the mistake of thinking that what we have here is just some kind of abstract discussion about "nations." For Paul, this is incredibly personal. Remember: thinking about these things had him in tears! Paul can put faces to the names of those he is weeping over. Where he finds "medicine for his soul" is in the doctrine of the promise because it means salvation isn't left to the whims of human choice, which so often fails.

Let me show how this is personal for you, too. Perhaps you have people in your life who were raised in the gospel—who have the "fleshly" markers of the faith, they've been baptized and so on—and yet they still don't walk with the Lord. Of course, we don't know the "secret book of life," so we maintain what the

Reformers called a “judgment of charity.” We pray and labor for them, resting in the fact that God’s promise is effective. We can trust Him to do what is right with those we love, precisely because the promise is anchored in His faithfulness, not in our performance.

Please do not settle merely for externals. The Law of faith is leading us to faith, and when we settle only for what we can see or perform, we aren’t going where God is leading us. It wasn’t true for Israel, and it won’t be true for us, either. The only way to benefit from the promise is by faith in Christ.

3. A Promised Election

Third, Paul protects God’s trustworthiness and promise by reminding us that all of these things are rooted in God’s sovereignty and choice.

The word he uses throughout Romans (and in other writings) is “election.”

Election comes from this Greek word which means to pick out or choose. Think of someone standing in front of a basket of fruit. They can have any of the fruit that they want, but what they take is their choice. Election means to choose one thing over another. And in this case Paul is talking about God choosing to treat people graciously and mercifully when he doesn’t have to.

And election doesn’t really bother us when we think of it that way. But we get a little more persnickety when we start thinking that God should treat all people with the same type of mercy or the same type of grace. And then we carry that assumption in and it can really upset us that some people get more grace than others, or a different kind of grace or love than another gets.

What Paul says here is, “God definitely gives more grace to some than others.” “God gives Jacob one kind of grace, and Esau doesn’t get that kind of grace.” That’s the whole reason Paul mentions verse 15 where God says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

God shows a kind of external mercy to the Israel of the Flesh, but they don’t all necessarily get to also be the Israel of the Promise. In fact, as we saw, lots of

Gentiles end up being ingrafted into the Israel of the Promise! People who were not God's people then become his people! You can imagine the critics now saying, "But he showed saving love to some, so he should show saving love to all of them!"

We will explore this more, but just consider: isn't that the thing that makes grace grace? Grace is God's undeserved kindness. As soon as you say, "God has to give it," you're not talking about grace anymore, are you? If you deserve it, then that's justice. And Paul says here in Romans 9, "you can't put those handcuffs on God. You can't command him to show the same grace to everyone."

The rest of Romans 9 is going to be Paul defending the absolute freedom of God to do things his way, and to give grace where he wants, and to give justice to everyone else. He's going to defend the more general principle in order to defend God's right to do that with a remnant within Israel.

I'm introducing this here because we do need to grasp what election is. We're about to dive head first into this topic for a couple of months, believe it or not.

Now, why is election so important to what Paul is doing here? Why does he need it? Well remember his agenda: He's defending God's right to have a spiritual Israel within ethnic Israel. He is saying, "Some within Israel are Jacob. Some within Israel are Esau." God's choice is what delineates the people within the corporate body who do believe from those within the corporate body who don't believe. Election is what makes all the difference.

So this is all about God's freedom. Notice in verse 11 how Paul mentions these two twins – Jacob and Esau. They were both from the same mother. There was nothing to distinguish them. They'd never done good or evil yet or anything. The only thing that made them differ was that Esau was older than Jacob. And even that one thing, Paul points out, God chose to do the opposite of what we'd expect. In Israelite culture we would expect the older son to receive the blessing of the Father. And yet God chose to bless the younger instead.

So this is all about God's choice, not anything in the person who receives God's grace. He takes away the very things that might distinguish Jacob and Esau and he says, all that's left is God and his freedom.

Paul points away from human effort or ethnicity and toward God's will as the center of this. That might not come as good news to us, because we like to feel in control of things. But really, it's better news that the promise is connected with God instead of us, because it means that the promise is secure. Why? Because its fulfillment depends entirely on God's eternal purpose. The promise doesn't depend on the creature using God's good gifts the right way or something like that.

And when God does it this way he is making sure that even when the "mass" of the nation of Israel is hardened due to their own sin, the promise is never (and will never be) in jeopardy. Why won't it be? Because it's anchored in the unchangeable character and freedom of God instead of in us and our finicky attitudes.

Now, how does that help the point Paul is making? It means that when we ask, "Did God's promise fail?" The answer is, it can't! Even when ethnic Israelites reject God's law, God still has a remnant among them – the people he has chosen for himself. None of this – not even widespread unbelief – is outside the power, plan, and purpose of God!

So you see, we're going to make some broader applications from this passage in the coming weeks after I return from next week's church campout.

In our next sermon in two weeks we're going to talk about this idea that "Jacob I have loved, Esau I hated," because I do believe you will have questions about what it means to say that God "hated" Esau. In the weeks and months after that, we're going to go all in on the topic of election and predestination, because it is so central to Paul's defense of God's promises and his faithfulness. If you don't understand predestination and election, you'll struggle to understand how God's promises haven't failed when there is unbelief all around us.

Conclusion

As we conclude, we need to go back to the question that's been hanging over Paul's head throughout our passage: Has God's word failed? If we only look on the surface—at the faces of those who reject Jesus or at how much our culture seems to be drifting from the Gospel—it might feel like the answer is yes. It might feel

like His word has failed. But Paul pushes us to look across the history of the covenant and gives us a resounding “No!” His promises haven’t and won’t fail!

The promise hasn't failed because God never misses His target. He is wise and competent and sovereign and good!

Like we’ve seen, the “real” promise was never just a blanket guarantee merely to a biological race. From the very beginning, with Isaac and Ishmael, God was showing us that being a child of the flesh isn't the same as being a child of the promise. The promise was always aimed at a people of *faith*. Abraham believed God and he was the father of Israel. So he was both.

But all of this means when we see the “Israel of the flesh” walk away, we aren't seeing a failed promise; we’re seeing the necessary distinction between the external ceremony and the internal grace.

This is why we should speak of God’s full and true plan for mankind with real confidence. God hasn't switched to a new religion or replaced His people with a different group. He’s doing exactly what He said He’d do: He’s gathering a perpetual church by grafting us into the ancient, holy root of Israel through faith.

God’s consistency on this is our anchor. It tells us that the God of Abraham is the same God who holds you today. His purpose isn't a “Plan B” scuttled together after a disaster; it’s a single, sovereign plan that spans all of history.

And what’s the root of that security? It’s the sovereign election of God. As we move from the “naming” of Isaac to the “choosing” of Jacob, we see that salvation doesn’t depend on human will or effort, but on God who has mercy.

If our standing before God depended on our finicky attitudes or our perfect performance, we’d be in constant danger. But because the promise is anchored in God’s freedom to choose, it’s unshakeable.

I'm sure for many of you, this raises some deep and difficult questions. Your curiosity's likely piqued, and maybe your sense of fairness is even a bit challenged by the idea of God’s absolute freedom. I want to ask you to be patient as we work

our way through Paul's arguments here. We're only just beginning to wade into the deep waters of election and predestination.

For the moment, let's rest in this: God's word hasn't failed and won't fail. He's the Potter, He's the Caller, and He's the keeper of the Promise. Whether you're mourning over a loved one who's wandered from Christ, or you're struggling to find your own footing, look to the God who "names" His offspring and keeps them forever. He's faithful, He's free, and He's God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Let's pray.