

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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October 4th, 2026

Sermon Title: Unconditional Election

Sermon Text: Romans 9:10-16

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.”

Rom. 9:14 ¶ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!

Rom. 9:15 For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

Rom. 9:16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

Main Point: Salvation depends ultimately on God's free mercy, not on human merit or will, so that all glory belongs to Him.

Outline:

1. Election in Scripture
2. An Offensive Doctrine
3. God’s Free Mercy

Introduction

There was a time in the life of the universe when there was no creation whatsoever. There was no water, there were no atoms, there were no rocks or dirt or breezes or stars or Nebulae or asteroids. There were no human beings or animals or plants... there was nothing. Not even angels. Nothing that has been made existed at all.

But there was God. And this God eternally existed in three persons, later revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this one God existed absolutely and transcendentally: fully happy, and happily full. God lacked nothing, and needed nothing.

We are told in the beginning of Genesis that God created the heavens and the earth by speaking. And when God spoke, things were made that previously did not exist, and could not have existed without his word.

In other words, God is not his creation, and the creation is not God. There is an infinite gulf between who He is, and who we are. He is maker, we are made. He is creator, we are creations.

And something else that is important to remember: God had no obligation upon Him to create. He did not owe it to us to make us. He wasn't "supposed" to do it. There was and is no rule or law above God that tells him how He is supposed to act toward the creation except what is within him.

Now, why am I telling you this primordial story? It's for one reason: if you understand that there was a time when there was nothing but God... if you understand that God was under no obligation to create... if you understand that God is not his creation... then when I tell you that God claims for himself the right to do anything with his creation that He wants, you should be more willing to accept it.

But if you take creation for granted... if you take your own existence for granted... if you sort of think, "Well of course I exist," then you will come to God with all sorts of assumptions about how he should treat you, what he should give you, and the sort of life that you think He is supposed to provide for you. In other words, if you

don't think of your own creation and existence with the deep humility of a creature, then instead, you'll come into his presence with a sense of entitlement.

And then when you come to a passage like the one before us today, instead of being amazed that *this* is how God chose to reveal himself and treat us, you may hear what Paul says and become angry, and you'll try to play 20 questions with him, and think that he owes you explanations and answers. In a sense, you may think that really God is supposed to answer to you and your ideas about him.

You may even find yourself answering back to God when he claims the right to make choices of what He will do with his creatures like you and me. And you may become like the thing molded who says to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"

This passage before us today is the most explicit passage I can think of in the Bible that addresses the freedom of God to do even fundamental things with his creatures such as choosing who will believe, and who will not... who will be awakened to eternal life, and who will be passed over.

So we are really at ground zero of just how offensive God can be, as Paul is using this doctrine of God's freedom to explain why it is that some believe and some don't. Why is Paul the Jew a believer, but so many of his other fellow countrymen not believers? Paul's answer is not to point out something about himself. His answer is the doctrine of God's election.

Paul's answer is not, "There was something in me. God saw potential. I had this or this or this going for me..." No, his answer is the opposite. Paul had nothing in him that was from himself that would have been lovely or good. In fact, Paul hated God's church. Paul's answer is to go to Scripture and to give us example after example of times when the only thing that divided one person from another was God Himself making a choice about what to do with them prior to any choices in them. Paul is humbled by God's grace precisely because God owed him nothing, and chose to freely give him everything. Paul's answer is what we call the doctrine of divine election. It's the doctrine of God's freedom to show mercy to some, and to pass over the rest, allowing them to continue in their state of sin.

Without this teaching on election, Paul doesn't have an answer to why God's promise hasn't failed. Without it his word does seem to have failed, and his promises seem to have failed. And without it he has no real protection against arrogance or boasting.

1. Election in Scripture

First, Paul is interested to show us that the doctrine of election is a biblical reality.
Election is a Scriptural doctrine.

Fundamentally, when we are talking about divine election we are talking about a choice that God makes. He decides to show grace to whomever he wills to show grace to. And he makes this choice prior to creation, prior to our existence. Even before we were born, God knew us, and he had decided that he would set his grace upon us.

And as we saw in the previous weeks as we've looked at the doctrine of God's grace, he is fully capable of changing the human heart, of bringing us to faith, or taking our heart of stone and giving a heart of flesh.

But we also see in the world around us that he has not done that for everyone. Not everyone does repent. Not everyone does believe the gospel and turn to Christ. And it doesn't take much to realize that if God has the power to change Paul's heart, then he can change anyone's heart. And yet he doesn't do that. So here is the question: Is it really true that God has that kind of agency in his own world? Does the ultimate decision about who comes to Christ belong to us or to God in the final analysis? As we've already seen, Paul says, that decision does ultimately belong to God, which is why he has not failed in his promises.

And the real question that we should care most about is not what philosophers say, or what our favorite theologian says... the question is, does the Bible teach this? Paul's answer is an emphatic yes!

So Paul turns to two examples from Scripture where God was free to do what he wanted, and where he made a choice unconstrained by anything in us. We're going to look at the first example this week, and we'll look at the second example of Pharaoh next week.

But the first example we see is in verses 10-13. Jacob and Esau were both brothers, both Abraham's grandsons, born to Isaac. Esau is the older brother, and Jacob is the younger brother. Now, traditionally in Ancient Near Eastern culture, the older son was the son who had the exalted position in the family. In that culture, the inheritance was divided between the two sons, with the older receiving two parts, and the younger receiving one part. He was also considered the successor of his father; the Lord of all that was his.

So you can see the force of what God does here, He is showing that he has the right to totally flip our expectations and go against our own human ideas or traditions. Look at how Paul tells it to us:

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." (Romans 9:10-13)

The older will serve the younger. Wait, God. That's upside down! Yes, he knows. And that's the point. In his choice of the younger Jacob over the older Esau, God was showing that His covenant line does not care about human customs, natural privileges, social status, or biological rights. If the blessing had gone to Esau, people could say it happened because Esau was the firstborn—it was his by right. By giving it to Jacob, God made it unmistakable that His covenant is a gift of pure, sovereign grace, dependent entirely on the One who calls, not on the status of the one who receives it.

Now, again, if you wanted to argue with Paul (and maybe you do), you might say, "Well maybe God decided to bless Jacob because he saw that he would be a good man, or that he would have faith in God." But if you look at Jacob's life, you really would have trouble finding what is so wonderful about him that he would deserve any of this. His name basically means "deceiver," and he lives up to that name. He was a manipulative trickster who exploited his own brother's desperation, and committed blatant fraud against his own father as he deceived his blind, dying father. He was a man who lived by self-reliance, not faith. Esau, at least was straightforward, honest, and quick to forgive his brother. Naturally speaking, if you

and I were picking a brother even based on their life, I think we'd pick Esau. He seems like a good guy, and Jacob doesn't. And he's the older brother – the reasonable choice to receive the blessing. Honestly, Esau's got it all, if we're going on what God would foresee in the man.

But here's the problem: even if Jacob was the "better" brother, Paul says that there is a reason that God said the older would serve the younger in Genesis 25:23. And Paul says that when God declares who would serve who before they had been born, God is showing that it's not based on them or their lives at all. Not even something God foresaw. Jacob is not the basis of God choosing him. God's freedom is the basis of him choosing to make Jacob's descendants the nation.

And here's what that also means: even God's choosing Israel at all is based on grace, and not something in them. It starts with one man and God's choice, but it turns into a whole nation that comes from one man who was chosen by grace and not by justice or merit or anything in himself.

This is the freedom of God! He owes nothing to sinners. And so if he chooses to give a good thing to one undeserving sinner, no injustice has been done. And if he chooses not to give that good thing to another undeserving sinner, no injustice has been done.

God can be gracious *when* he wants, *how* he wants, and to *whomever* he wants.

2. An Anticipated Offense

Now this takes us to our second point today, which will be very brief, but Paul presents us with an anticipated offense.

Okay, so maybe you hear all of this and you think, "This doesn't seem fair! Esau deserved the blessing." And maybe you think, "God can't decide these things, we have to decide them. That way when they happen, they belong to us."

I want to briefly point something out: if you're offended, it means you heard Paul right, because whatever he just said, he expected people to be upset. Look at verse 14.

And this is where Paul says, “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part?” Now, I have known many people who have learned about election and predestination as it is presented in the Bible, and many of them hear about it and instinctively say, “That’s not fair!”

If you react that way, I want you to know, you are following Paul’s argument very well. You are tracking with him. Because think about this: if Paul is not talking about God’s sovereign election, then verse 14 doesn’t need to be there. Why? Because I’ve never heard anybody ever say “that’s not fair” when someone says that God chose them because they chose God or would choose God. Nobody is offended by that. Nobody feels like they’ve had something taken from them when you say that.

If Paul were to shift the power back to the sinner to decide for themselves, and take it out of God’s hand, nobody would ever say, “Well Paul, that’s not fair. I shouldn’t have a choice. God should have a choice,” or something like that.

The fact that you might think, “that’s not fair,” or “that seems unjust” means that you are most certainly at least following what Paul is saying so far. So before we move to the next point, let’s just acknowledge that the doctrine of election offends us, and that is part of the package deal here. God is God, and we are not, and that does upset us.

But Paul needs to be saying something offensive enough to our own natural way of thinking that he would then *need* to spend more than a dozen verses defending God against this charge of injustice, and upholding His freedom to choose how to show mercy to his creation. And so if you just think backwards for a moment, the doctrine of election makes sense of why Paul now needs to make the defense that he has just given and is going to continue to give. And other smoothed-down understandings of this passage [that put all the weight on us]... then that just makes this passage baffling. Why would he would spend all this ink and scroll-space saying what he’s about to keep saying throughout Romans chapter 9, if he’s saying something so inoffensive? He wouldn’t.

But if you’re offended, hold on to that for the moment and keep going, but be ready for the way that God shifts our perspective from fairness to mercy.

3. God's Free Mercy

Third, our passage takes us to reflect deeply on God's free mercy.

This is something very powerful to consider: your instinct will be to try to read these passages in a way that smooths out everything Paul is saying. In that way, we try to become defenders of God where we think he needs our help. The doctrine of election seemingly puts God in a corner. Surely God isn't like this. We've misunderstood something. We sort of try to help so that God can fit with our ideas of what people do and don't deserve.

Here's the problem: when we think this way we fundamentally do not understand what it means to deserve something. If you think any human being on the face of the earth deserves anything other than condemnation from God, then you haven't read the Bible.

Because in the fall, we died. In the fall, all of mankind lost our original righteousness. In the fall, we became polluted enemies of the Lord. We shared in the guilt of that first sin. We are far from innocent. We are far from deserving.

And so when you or I or any fallen person on planet earth of any age whatsoever receive a good thing, please know: God is not giving you justice, and he is not giving you what is fair. He's not giving you what you deserve. What he is doing, by definition, is showing you grace.

He causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. That rain is mercy. Undeserved. But he brings it anyway, not because we deserve water to drink, but because he decides each and every day to show mercy. You draw a breath of air. That air is not deserved, it's a moment by moment mercy. That food you eat: not deserved. It's mercy.

It's God's undeserved kindness. Mercy is when you have an opportunity to give someone what's coming to them and you treat them better than that.

This is why we see this concluding answer to the question, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" The real question: when God didn't give Esau what we would think he should get, was that injustice? God didn't give Esau

the blessing. Was God wrong? “No! Esau deserved nothing!” And Jacob didn’t deserve the blessing, either. Neither of them did.

And Paul backs this up, not with his own reasoning, but by going to Scripture. Verse 15:

“For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’”

Think of what God appeals to here: not some bigger principle outside of himself that he lives up to. There is no such principle. There’s nothing higher than God. And so God appeals to his own freedom.

You see, all of this discussion of election really comes down to this: who is free? Is it God, who made all things from nothing by the word of his power? Or is it the creature who not only didn’t create himself, but doesn’t even deserve to continue existing?

You see, once you understand sin, and what it deserves, you should be willing to say, “Even if God never shows mercy, he is good and he is in the right. Even if rain never falls, and food never comes, and the sun never shines again, he is good. Because I am a sinner and I do not deserve any good thing.”

Once you understand sin, you will have no room to complain, “Why doesn’t he show grace to everyone? Why doesn’t he give this good thing that he gives to Jacob to Esau also?” You ask that question because you don’t understand sin. You don’t understand what it is that God is holy.

The real thing that should baffle us isn’t that some people don’t believe. The real miracle honestly is that anyone believes at all. But there are many throughout the world who do believe, because God has chosen to show mercy on whomever he will show mercy, and he chooses to show compassion on whomever he shows compassion.

This is Paul extolling the freedom and grace of God of God. And we should, too.

Conclusion

As we conclude, I want to bring application where Paul sees an application. What is his application at this point in the passage? It's in verse 16: "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

Do you know what God is doing here? He's growing our gratitude, and making us see that we don't deserve the good things that that comes to us. If you believe in Jesus Christ, that is a glorious thing. And even that faith is a gift, undeserved. God showed mercy to you. And if he showed mercy to you, it's a gift you didn't deserve!

Believer, don't you feel humbled by this? To know that the one who spoke all things into existence decided to look at you and say, "Mine." Before I believed these doctrines I really thought these doctrines would puff people up because it would mean that they were special. I thought that Reformed people who believed in election must be really stuck up because they were "the elect" and everyone else wasn't.

And what I realized as I read Scripture (and especially Romans) is, yes and no. We are special. We are elect. We are chosen. Marked out by God and beloved. That should make anyone in Christ feel secure and loved and important. So guilty as charged, we do feel special.

But at the very same time, the doctrines of grace also mean that it was nothing about us! Nothing in us that made us choosable or precious or important or righteous or holy. No way!

Of all people, we know that God chose us "out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance" in us or any other thing in us as creatures. We did nothing to move him to be kind to us. He simply did these things for the sake of his glorious grace. So there is no room for pride. Only gratitude. If you're proud, you misheard.

Our God is free, and he is gracious. And so instead of complaining against Him, we (of all people) should glorify our God who treats all of his creatures far better than we deserve.

Let's pray.