

Series: Gleanings in Genesis: “Not By Works: The Mystery of God’s Choosing”

Scripture text: Genesis 25:21-28, Romans 9:10b-16

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Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

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This morning, we will resume our sermons in Genesis where we will examine certain key passages in this foundational book. This morning, we will read a short section from Genesis 25 and also look at its interpretation in the NT book of Romans [chapter 9].

Scripture Reading

Genesis 25:21-28

“And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. 22 The children struggled together within her, and she said, “If it is thus, why is this happening to me?” So, she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger.”

Gen. 25:24 When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

Gen. 25:27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.”

Now over to Romans 9:10b-16

“...when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 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— 12 she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” 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! 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.” 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

Let’s pray together.

A God of Our Making

Have you ever heard someone say something like this?

“If God existed, He wouldn’t let innocent people die.”

“If God existed, He wouldn’t allow war, sickness, or abuse.”

“If God existed, He would prevent everyone from going to hell....”

Each one of these statements sounds somewhat reasonable, but they make certain assumptions. For example, each statement makes the assumption that in order for God to exist, **he has to be act a certain way. He would have to do certain things in order for someone to believe he is real.**

But the problem is that when we do this, we are creating a “God” of our making and design. We are making God in our image.

Think of each of those statements. Embedded in each statement there is an underlying belief of what it means for God to be good according to our thinking. For example, for God to exist and be good, **he must do what we think is right.** He must: prevent death, save all of humanity, abolish evil, and keep us from sickness.

Whether we realize it or not, most people have a particular set of assumptions in this area based on what they believe God should be. And while we might not recognize it, we might also fall into the habit of doing the same thing: making assumptions or deciding who we think God **should be.** Or what it means for him to be **good.**

And as we approach this text, I encourage you to ask yourself, “what things do you assume **must** be true about God? What do you think God must do in order for him to be real or to be good?”

The Divine Defines

And then, secondly, is it right for us to think in this way? Are we the ones who get to determine who God is and what he ought to be doing? This, of course, is a rhetorical question. We know that a creature doesn’t decide what his Creator should be like. God, the Creator, tells us who he is and how he acts.

This introduction is important to the message because today we will be focusing on what God tells us about **who he is** and **how he acts.**

And I want to ask you to gently consider if it is possible that you have been living under a God of your making, instead of the God of the Bible, when it comes to the subject of **God’s sovereignty and election.**

Now, I admit that this is a very difficult and unpopular subject. It may make many uncomfortable.

But at the same time, it is a subject that appears repeatedly throughout the whole of Scripture that simply cannot be ignored. And God in his perfect wisdom put it there for us so that we might know him.

And if it is in the Scriptures, which is our greatest authority, we would do well to take a closer look at it.

I think that we would all agree that we are required to believe what the Bible says is true, not what *we want the Bible to say is true*. And if we have a problem with God's word, the problem is not with the Word of God, it is with us! [Sproul]

So, with that in mind, let's look at how God defines himself and his actions through the story of Jacob and Esau that we've just read.

Who God Says He Is

The story of Jacob and Esau opens with a somewhat confusing story.

It is not immediately clear what is meant with this information. That is, until we turn to Paul's explanation. It is there that we are given further information that what God is showing Rebekah is that he has had a plan since the beginning to choose Jacob.

In fact, God's word teaches us that the conflict in Rebekah was so "that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls."

In these few words, Paul is showing us that God has embedded in this story that God sovereignly rules the world and chooses or elects some and not others.

Election in Genesis

And one of the first things that we learn is a little more information on why God chose Jacob over Esau.

We see this, because as we look at this Genesis passage, we see that the twin brothers were struggling within their mother's womb. In fact, the struggle was so intense that their mother suspected that something so extraordinary was going on inside her that she cried to God for help! [Calvin, Genesis 25:22]

And this would have been a strange story, if it weren't for the fact that God was making a distinction between the two brothers.

And that was when God revealed to her that the two children in her womb would be the fathers of two different nations that would oppose each other, and that the older brother would serve the younger brother.

Through biblical history, in the conflicts between the descendants of Jacob (the Israelites) and the descendants of Esau (the Edomites), we see how the truth of what God says here played out.

God's message was later reiterated through the prophet Malachi, and once again expanded on by the apostle Paul in the book of Romans.

And in Paul's writing we get a much more complete picture of what God was telling Rebekah. Through Paul, we see that God was not *predicting* the future. God was telling Rebekah what would come to pass. What he had decided and planned.

And in God's plan, he ordained for Jacob to be his chosen one and not his brother Esau.

Election in the Details

Not By Family Line

The evidence of election is seen here in the details. Up to this point we know that God had made his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. While Abraham had two children, one with Hagar (his slave woman) and one with Sarah (his wife), God chose to carry the covenant promises through Isaac and not through Ishmael.

And in some ways, God's choosing of Isaac makes sense to us. After all, God had promised Abraham a son through Sarah. It makes sense that Abraham's illegitimate means of having a child apart from her would not be blessed by God.

But here, we have a different situation. Isaac did everything right. He didn't have any illegitimate children. Following his father's instructions, he had married a woman who was clearly provided to him by God.

And now he is blessed with twins! It seems that being the heirs of Isaac, they would be guaranteed to be favored by God.

But God, Malachi and Paul say that was not the case. Paul writes that though the twins

“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— 12 she [Rebekah] was told, “The older will serve the younger.” 13 As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” [Romans 9:11-13]

Paul clarifies that this was not a mistake or a failure on God's part. Not all who are born of Israel belong to Israel. Not all of Abraham's children belong to God's promise just because they are born to him.

God demonstrated this specifically through these twins for this very purpose. To show that it isn't about being “a child of Abraham” but being a *true child* of Abraham.

So, it isn't about the family lineage. It was about God's choosing.

Election: Not What They Had Done

And it wasn't about what they had done either. This passage also shows that it isn't about being a particularly special. God makes this statement before they could even prove themselves one way or another.

If it were about giftedness, Jacob would not have been favored. It would have been the opposite. I mean, if you had to choose one of these two, the more favorable of the two was Esau. Look at the facts for a minute.

Scripture describes Esau as a mighty and skillful hunter. Of the two, Esau was the older and stronger. He was a hairy man, and he worked hard in the field. And on top of all that, he was preferred by his father Isaac, because he found his cooking delicious.

Jacob, on the other hand, was younger and weaker. Listen again how the Bible described the two:

“Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field...
...while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.”

Jacob was a sneak and a swindler. He duped Esau out of his birthright and his blessing. It also appears that Jacob was kind of a mama's boy. It says that she *preferred him*, and even when it came to him getting a blessing, she was the one who had to help him plan everything. She even did the cooking for him!

On all accounts, if we were judging by abilities, talents, good looks or anything external, Esau would have been the preferred choice – the manly man.

But God chose Jacob.

But none of that is actually relevant. Because God's choosing Jacob and not Esau is that he did so **before** Jacob and Esau had even been born. Before they had done anything good or bad.
[Romans 9:11]

But nevertheless, in this way, God shows us that his purposes and compassion did not depend on the quality or performance of Jacob's life, but **only** and **entirely** on God's choosing. It was God's calling. [v.11]

God's Sovereignty and Election

One aspect of who God is (that he reveals in this passage) is that he rules all things – that he is **sovereign**. And that means that he rules over all things, all time and even salvation. From the beginning of time, God has set all things and there is nothing outside of his reach. And that includes our salvation.

In his helpful book, *Chosen by God*, Sproul writes, “If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God’s sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled.” [Sproul, *Chosen By God*]

The very fact that God is eternal, all-powerful and unchanging **and** sovereign gives us great hope. He orders all things according to his wisdom and rules all everything. No power is greater. Not us, not angels, nor archangels, not even Satan. All things are under God’s rule.

And “all things” means that even **salvation** is under God’s sovereign rule and under God’s **choosing**. God’s choosing, also known as “election.”

Election can be understood as God’s eternal choice of certain individuals to salvation before the world was created. Not based on anything foreseen, or any action within them. But only by God’s grace and good pleasure. [Berkoff, *Systematic Theology*, 222; WCF 3.5]

The doctrine of election is a teaching that is reiterated throughout the Scriptures.

In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Jeremiah 1:5 says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” [Psalm 139]

Then, in Eph. 1:5, Paul, writes, “In love he [God] predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will....”¹ [See footnote for additional key passages]

And finally, in Matt. 10:29 we are reminded that even though two small sparrows are sold for a penny, not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.

In all these ways, we see that the Scripture confirms God’s sovereignty.

Unjust or Merciful?

Now, when we are faced with the truth of God’s sovereignty and election, our initial reaction might be one of uneasiness. Afterall, it is difficult to comprehend **why** God would choose some and not others. Why would he ever choose us?

We might even wonder if there was some injustice.

¹ **John 15:16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.... **Eph. 1:4** even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.... **Ps. 135:4** For the LORD has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession. **Jer. 1:5** Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. **Gal. 1:15** But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace.... **Ps. 139:16** Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. **2 Tim. 1:9** who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began....

But I think that one of the reasons we go there in our minds is because *we don't understand this doctrine enough*. We don't really get the context of election.

Because when we focus primarily on why God doesn't save everyone, or why he doesn't just forgive everyone, we aren't accounting for or at least not remembering that the context of our salvation is one in which mankind has broken God's law and must pay the consequences.

God, as the Creator, has every right to do what he wants with his creation. Paul, possibly wrestled with similar questions when he anticipated this question of injustice and wrote:

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? 22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction...."

And the deeper reality to all of this is that not only do we have no right to tell our Creator how to rule the world, but we also have nothing to stand on ourselves because we are guilty.

The real question isn't really why doesn't God save everyone. The question we should be wondering about is *why did God save anyone?*

Death Row

In the dramatic movie scene where someone is on death row, we have now come to expect that the governor will call last minute and stay the execution. But from what I've been able to find, in real life, is that most governors never commute an execution.

Why is that? The answer is simple. Those particular criminals deserved the death penalty. That is the just thing to do.

Why aren't we crying out "injustice!?" Why don't people think that governors are pure evil for not stopping these executions?

Because there is no injustice being done by the governors. Governors have all the power to stop the executions of those on death row, but they choose not to.

And if a governor does pardon one death-row inmate, would anyone really feel like they would necessarily need to pardon all the other prisoners? No, that would be the greater injustice.

But these are the arguments made about God.

And the reality is that when we see election of those who are as unfair, it is often because we see sin as small and insignificant.

But God is a holy God, and despite the fact that we were all condemned to eternal punishment for our sins, God choose to call some of us. To rescue some of us from that eternal punishment.

Brothers and sisters, it is here that we see who God is. A compassionate, merciful God. A God who shows us grace. Where we learn that though he could let all transgressors go to death row, he was compassionate and merciful.

See, election isn't a doctrine that makes us proud or better than others. It is a doctrine that teaches us that there was **absolutely nothing** that we could have done to save ourselves, but that God chose us and showed us mercy anyway.

In Ezekiel 37, we see the condition of our lives illustrated in a powerful and memorable way. In a vision, the Lord calls Ezekiel to go to a valley full of dry bones (bones that had been there for a long time). And the Lord took him out to be in the middle of the valley and asked him, "Can these bones live?" *We all know that they cannot.* And yet, the Lord gave them life. He brought life from death. From a state of being dry bones, God put life in them, and they lived!

And that is our condition – we are dead in our sins. Dead as dry bones. We cannot bring ourselves to life. We cannot seek God unless he comes and gives us life. And it was in that condition that God chose us and gave us life.

What does this mean for us?

We Worship

And so, what does that mean for us? How does the birth story of two twins from some several thousand years ago help us today? What does the doctrine of election and sovereignty mean for you?

What we can take away from this passage, is not so much about what we will do, but ***who we worship.***

For the correct response to this doctrine is a heart overflowing with thanksgiving and worship.

Because if you know God this morning, it isn't because you are smarter, or you made the right decision. Your salvation is not because you were born in the US, or because you came from good family.

In the same way that Jacob was not an ideal candidate, and neither was Moses, neither were the fishermen or Jesus' followers.

But God choose them to be ***his people.*** By grace – not because of anything within them.

And in this choosing, there is simply no room to boast. There is no explanation for why God should have chosen us and not others.

If you are here today, it is because God in his love and compassion *chose you* before you were even your days were even formed.

Ps. 139:16 reminds us: “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

God was thinking of us before we were born! And this reality should change us. How we will live in the reality of who God is as a sovereign God changes our outlook on life, our perspective on everything.

And it humbles us, for while others make a wretched choice, we stand secure in the grace and forgiveness of God. Our only response should be worship!

Changes our Lives

But not only is our salvation secure in the Lord, but *so is our life, our day to day.*

Having a perspective and understanding that our good times and our hardships are not due to bad luck or fate, but due to the blessing of our heavenly Father.

Those good medical results, that close call on the road, the meal that was delivered to your home when you simply couldn't do one more thing.

You may have heard the well-meaning phrase that people sometimes repeat to someone facing an accident or tragedy or death: Just remember, “*Everything happens for a reason*” or “*All things work together.*”

Phrases like these may not feel comforting in the moment, yet they point toward a profound truth. They express the right sentiment. The intuition is right, though delivery could probably be worked on.

What a grieving person needs, is God's sovereignty. But what the mourning, grieving or suffering person needs is more than an expression. They need you to sit with them in their pain, and to help them see what they cannot see. To grasp what it means that not a single molecule in the universe moves without God's permission. To grasp that the terrible thing that is happening to them, is not missed by God and he never plays with the lives of his children but cares for them individually.

And that is what the joyful person needs too. We all need to remember that all things, even the blessings of life, are part of God's sovereign plan for his glory and our good.

So, comfort and seek to show your loved one God's sovereignty in unique and caring ways. For God's sovereignty reminds us that no matter what comes our way, there is nothing random or unpredictable with God, and it also reminds us that God is in absolute control.

In Conclusion

Brothers and Sisters, as you go out this week, may the knowledge that God is not only with you, but that he is sovereign over even your salvation, bring you comfort and peace that surpasses your every situation and circumstance.

And may you know that our holy and righteous judge has chosen to call you to himself, to write your names on his hand and to call you his own. This is unfathomable news. That the God of the universe chose *you*.

Rom. 8:31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Rom. 8:37 [AND] ...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8]

No one. No one can separate us. What a mysterious and gracious love that has been lavished on us. Praise the Lord, for his love, mercy, and grace, endure forever. Amen.

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