

The Faithfulness of God

From time to time people ask, "What Scripture can you turn to in the Bible to prove the plan of God?" We talk a lot about the plan of God. Some people say, "The Bible doesn't talk about the plan of God. Give me chapter and verse."

Yes, we have chapters about the resurrection where some detail is given about the resurrection. We have chapters which deal with faith. We have chapters which deal with love. I don't need to go into those.

The thing we have to realise in terms of God's Word is that people like to have what is referred to as a "systematic handbook." There was a project at one time entitled the STP, the *Systematic Theology Project* in which the Church tried to set down Scripture and verse of everything they believed, to justify what they believed because most religious people in this world today operate according to systematic theology.

But they have a problem because the Bible isn't a systemic theology textbook! In fact, the plan of God is contained throughout the entirety of Scripture. It doesn't really matter what book you want to turn to, if you understand the plan of God you will eventually end up coming face to face with it.

Now it's not that God is unsystematic. I think that needs to be abundantly clear. In Romans chapter one Paul says that people can know the greatness of God by looking at the universe. I don't believe it matters how atheistic you might be, I think that anyone who examines the universe has to understand that this universe is created according to wonderful design! There is nothing haphazard about the universe. That is not God's character. In fact, Paul told the Corinthian Church everything was to be done decently and in order. There had to be a particular system.

We don't come to the Deep Creek Feast site and decide to start Services with "special music" first because we don't feel like singing the hymns. "Then, once we have warmed up a little and got over lunch, then we will have the song service where everyone else has the special music." We don't decide to have the sermon first and have the sermonette afterwards. As Mr Hulme says, there is tradition in the Church. We follow order.

There is one "disorderly" part of Services. You will notice it whenever a non-American leads songs. Outside of the United States, people are always asked to turn to a particular hymn or page, and THEN rise. I must admit there are some "righteous" song-leaders in the United States who have got it right. They must have attended a Feast abroad or something of that nature. But almost to a man, song-leaders from the United States say "Pick up your hymn books, rise and then turn to such a page." I don't think that is a matter of confusion. It is a little variation on the theme.

As the apostle Paul said in Romans chapter one, if we look at the creation we can see the majesty, the greatness of God. We see that God is a systematic individual. He does things in order and properly. And as He said at the end of Genesis chapter one, when He looked at His creation it could only be summed up as "very good." It didn't have errors in it. Everything was good.

Systematic theology as we know it today is the consequence of a Hellenistic or a Greco-Roman mindset. Unfortunately "God fluffed" because He didn't use any people with Greco or Roman mindsets to write the Bible! Every one He used had a very Semitic or Hebraic mindset, a very different mindset from that of the Hellenistic world. God did that for a reason.

I am sure He could have easily converted a few minds amongst the Hebrew prophets into very good systematic minds if He had so desired. But He didn't desire to. The Eternal wanted to show ANOTHER side of His character, another side of His nature. The people He used as intermediaries to write the Scriptures did not have a Hellenistic mindset - not even the apostle Paul.

There is a controversial section of Scripture which, to my mind, speaks very loudly about the plan of God. But it speaks about the plan of God not necessarily in a way that, "This comes first, followed by that, followed by that." It speaks about God from the way in which the whole Bible speaks about God. It is an invitation to come to understand the very character of the mind of God.

This section of Scripture that I would like to spend time with you today is Romans chapters nine through eleven. This section of Scripture is summed up by Paul as how God is faithful to His promises. We might rephrase that as a question: "How faithful is God to His promises?" We might also say, "What in the world is God doing?"

Now this section of Scripture does not deal with the plan of God in a systematic manner for a very good reason. It is not a systematic theology textbook. The apostle Paul was not a systematic theologian. People have read the apostle Paul and said, "That guy is out of his tree. He contradicts himself."

No, he doesn't. He is not writing systematic theology. When he is talking about terms he is not necessarily using terms in exactly the same way. Since the Reformation, screeds have been written about how Paul handles justification. Martin Luther looked at it one way. The Catholic Church looked at it the other way. They are still going at it, slugfest, to this very day as to what is the right way of looking at justification in the epistles of Paul. People try to use Paul as a systematic theologian - which he is not.

This particular section of Scripture, to my mind, provides a very interesting insight into the plan of God. An understanding of the plan of God such as you and I have enables us to avoid the controversy that so many people find themselves in, in this section of Scripture.

The faithfulness of God is the basis of Paul's epistle. Paul is really setting out to tell the people in Rome and you and I in this day and age that the Eternal God IS faithful to His Word! He said:

Romans 1:16 (English Standard Version) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

One of the very first quotations that the apostle Paul uses in his epistle is from Habakkuk 2:4. "The righteous shall live by faith."

The book of Romans is not JUST about faith. The book of Romans is unique in another way because most of Paul's direct quotations from the Old Testament are IN the book of Romans - and the majority of those quotations are in chapters nine through eleven!

What does that mean? It means that we need to be aware of WHAT the apostle Paul is quoting. There is a potential Bible Study to keep you occupied for the next few weeks or months! Go through and take each of Paul's quotations and see why it is that he takes that particular part of the Old Testament; why he takes just that particular verse and quotes it.

Most of Paul's quotations from the Old Testament are in the book of Romans and the majority of them are in this section. In fact, some 51 out of some 89 quotations from the Old Testament in the book of Romans are in this particular section. So it's important to examine some of those in their context - or ALL of them in their context if we were to do an exhaustive study. We simply don't have that time today. Maybe I can give it to you as something to take home and study in due course.

In Romans nine, Paul starts with some key concepts.

***Romans 9:1 I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit,
2 that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart.
3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh,***

4 who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises;

5 of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.

In verse six he really starts to get into "the meat" of what he is going to address because in verses 3-5 he asks us a question: "I have these brethren (Jews as we would call them today - the Israelites) to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God and the promises, from whom Jesus Christ came."

6 But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect ...

What is the problem here? Has the Word of God had no effect? One translation says:

6 It is not as though the word of God has failed ...

In the normal way of looking at it, and looking at the number of people who had accepted Christ at the time of the apostle Paul, and the paucity of people who really were true followers of Jesus Christ in the first century, especially amongst the Jews, this whole thing has failed. It is not accomplishing anything. You might say it's a handful of people, a very small number.

But Paul said that that is the wrong opinion to have.

I know that from time to time writers get caught up in the idea that the world at this present time is involved in a climactic struggle between Jesus Christ on the one hand and Satan on the other, to get as many people on "their side" as they possibly can. They portray Jesus Christ trying to pull people into His camp. People produce cartoons about it.

In the 1970s there was a fascinating cartoon published in the newspaper of Satan and Jesus Christ playing "Risk." Many people at college played Risk in the 1970s, "to see who could conquer the world." The whole idea of the world is this great Risk contest between Jesus Christ on the one hand and Satan on the other. The cartoonist was quite correct. He saw Satan winning hands down!

I have another article in which a man talks about the enormity of trying to "save six billion people for Jesus Christ"! How do you go about it? How do you accomplish it? Some churches feel that their mission is to save every last person from the Lake of Fire. "They have got to do everything they can to find that little Chinese man in Outer Mongolia," as the case may be, and "preach Christ to him, because there is a contest going on at this point in time."

I think many theologians have looked at that and said, "This is a failure."

The apostle Paul says, "It's NOT a failure! The Word of God HAS had effect." But you have got to see it from God's perspective, not from OUR perspective. He said:

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

7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but (quoting from the Old Testament) "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

Let me read it to you from the *New King James Version*:

7 nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called."

Throughout this section Paul uses a number of "catchwords" or keywords. Two of them are in this section. The first is "the word," the Word of God. The other one is "the seed" or "offspring" of Abraham. Paul uses what we might classify as "Midrash." It is a form of teaching undertaken by the rabbis.

We might say that Paul is the closest thing in the New Testament Church to a rabbi. He had been trained as one. He was schooled in their method of using Scripture. He uses their method of Scripture just as Jesus Christ uses their method of Scripture.

That method of Scripture was used on a certain presumption that you and I often miss these days. They were speaking to people who KNEW what the Bible said! When they quoted something from the book of Genesis, they knew the EXACT CONTEXT of what was being said. Most of us don't! Even I have to go back and look and ask what the context is. How is that being expressed?

Oftentimes, in using this form they would know the keywords or the catchwords and they would know that they are not in the text that is being quoted, but if you go a few verses further on, that keyword is there; that link to what you are talking about at this time is given.

Let me take a little digression here to explain how Paul and his fellows and Jesus Christ used the Scriptures. You and I have a Bible. I have about 24 Bibles on my computer in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, Danish, Norwegian and English! I have about 17 different English translations.

How did people get on in the days of the apostle Paul? They didn't sit in the synagogue or in their "house church" with a Bible on their lap. Not at all. The Scriptures were in their mind.

Recently I had the opportunity have a look and get very close to the *Codex Sinaiticus* in the British Library. They estimate that it took 365 calves to produce one Bible! The book of Isaiah is the longest of the scrolls in the Old Testament. It was about the maximum size of a scroll they could make by joining lambs' skins or calves' skins. It would take probably a dozen skins.

Start to extrapolate that. To start with, you have to buy these animals, then you have to kill them, skin them and tan the hide. Then you have to turn the hide into parchment. The *Codex Sinaiticus* is parchment rather than leather.

What is the cost of that? It is a very expensive undertaking before you put anything on the page! The Jews were very particular as to how they put things on the page. They didn't just start at one end and keep writing. They would rule out the page. Someone would come through with a template and measure out the pages, where the lines should be and so on.

They inscribed the skin with an incisor of some form. They didn't cut the skin but they inscribed the skin so that the scribe, when he came, would know where to write and how to write. They knew how many panels they would get on that scroll. So there were not too many copies of the Book around! At best the synagogue would have one.

When a child was about 10 -12 years of age he went to school. People didn't have textbooks in those days. Books were an expensive commodity. I would presume that schools were associated with synagogues in most cases and young boys would then be taught rote what the book says. They may have had to learn to write it down for themselves on scraps of ostracons or papyrus, or whatever was cheap. They learned to write and they learned to remember it.

You and I listen today to create points of reference. We listen to the sermon. We make notes of the Scriptures referred to. To use "techie" language, you create a "database" in your head.

"Mr Fitzpatrick spoke about that on the Feast of Trumpets in 2002. I think I can find my notes on that."

Or, "Somebody else spoke on that subject ..." You don't remember what he said. You just remember that he spoke on that subject. You have to recall. Who spoke on that subject? Maybe you go around and you work out who spoke on it and you start to locate what it was.

The apostles as boys, the apostle Paul as a boy, Jesus Christ as a boy, did not hear the Torah in order to create a database. They heard it to remember it!

I would hazard a guess that the apostle Paul could probably quote the entirety of the Old Testament from memory once you "get him on a roll"! (You can take me up on this when he is resurrected.) What else did he have to put in there?

There was no television, no Internet. There was no "blogging" to do or to keep up with. There were no mp3s to download and wander round ringing in your ears helping you go deaf in the process. There were no books to take out of the library. There were no journals, no magazines and no newspapers.

Your whole educational system as a Jewish person was based on one Book. You learned about agriculture from that one Book. You learned your geography from that Book.

Jews weren't particularly good at mathematics except when it came to pounds, shillings and pence or shekels or whatever it may have been. Obviously they learned to count very well, but the Bible didn't teach them higher mathematics. It wasn't concerned about that.

Their whole education was formed out of that one Book. That Book formed a very important part of their thinking process in a very profound way which I doubt that we could even recreate today - even if we could put a "flash drive" into a person's head - simply because our world is so diametrically different. We are just not trained in that way.

But Paul was writing to people who WERE trained that way, people who could take what he was saying and put it in context.

Acts 15 recounts the conference in Jerusalem. There are some very interesting points here. It is worthwhile appreciating what James is saying to the rest of the apostles at that period of time. At the end of the discussion of the matter after Peter, Paul and Barnabas have spoken and given witness to the way in which God has worked with the Gentiles, James gets up:

Acts 15:13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me:

14 "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

15 "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

Then he quotes from Amos 9:

16 'After this I will return

And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down;

I will rebuild its ruins,

And I will set it up;

17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD,

Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name,

Says the LORD who does all these things.'

18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

19 "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

These people are in the PROCESS of turning to God.

20 "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

Many people believe that that is all Christians had to do. I put it to you rather to say that is what they had to do BEFORE they could come into the fellowship of the Church.

To put it into the context of today, if a young man came to Mr Fitzpatrick and said, "I am a heroin addict, but I want to change," I think one of the things that Mr Fitzpatrick would wisely counsel him to do is

to do something about recovering from his drug addiction before he came to Sabbath Services. There are certain distances that people have to make from their previous conduct.

The apostle James was telling the Gentiles what they had to do so that they could then fellowship with the Church. This is not baptismal counselling. This is what you need to be doing before you come to Services!

If a minister visits a person who is a "chain-smoker," I am sure he would point out to him, "If you come to Church, no one smokes. Maybe this is going to be a real challenge for you. Maybe you need to think about what you are going to do, how you are going to handle this. Is this something that you really want to give up? Is it something you CAN give up before you start coming to Services?"

Today we have various things like that where people need to change their conduct because their conduct is so aberrant. The Gentile society was an aberrant society. Unfortunately our society is becoming more and more like it every day we live.

Let's carry on because James said a very interesting thing which is overlooked:

21 "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

So a Gentile coming into the knowledge of the truth ought to acquaint himself or herself with the Holy Scriptures. At this point in time, the Church was still meeting in the synagogues. James is saying, "If someone is really honest about wanting to be part of the Church, if God is really working with them, they need to go and learn the Word of God."

They need to go through this exercise of coming to understand what the Word of God says so that it is in their mind, so that they can relate to it.

In Romans 9, the apostle Paul talks about the word and about the seed. People would have understood the context of that. There is a need to examine these quotations that Paul refers to, in a larger context.

But let's move on because we don't have time to spend examining every one in a larger context today. We will come back and we will touch upon some as we move along.

If we were to look at Romans 9 - 11 as a section, we find that in the first nine verses Paul sets out his case. He sets out his anguish over Israel: what he is concerned about, what motivates him.

Then in Romans 9:6-29, he talks about God's freedom, how God goes about doing what God does. It is not because He is hustling against Satan as we will see. It's not for that reason whatsoever. He talks about God's freedom and the purpose of election.

Then from Romans 9:30 through to the end of Romans 10:21 he addresses the aspect of Israel stumbling to attain righteousness by faith.

In Romans 11:1-32 he talks about how God is going to have mercy on Israel AND the Gentiles. Then he concludes in the last three verses of chapter 11. This is a rough schema of Paul's message to the Church in Rome and to ourselves.

Romans 9:6 contains his main thesis:

Romans 9:6 (English Standard Version) But it is not as though the word of God has failed...

Has the Word of God failed? To the apostle Paul the answer is, "Definitely not!"

Paul raises the aspect of questions but he always says, "What shall we say then?" "How do we handle this? How do we understand this?"

He goes on in the succeeding verses to raise three principle questions in giving a response. He raises the question:

Romans 9:14 ... Is there unrighteousness (or injustice) with God? ...

Is that what we can say? To a certain extent, that is the way in which people look at God today. They look at God as being unrighteous or unjust. But we find that God is not unjust. The apostle Paul makes that abundantly clear.

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

In Romans 11 he raises another question for us:

Romans 11:1 (English Standard Version) I ask, then, has God rejected his people?

Have they lost it? Has it all gone?

There are three major questions:

- Is there not injustice with God? Paul says, "Certainly not, emphatically not."
- Why does God find fault?
- Has God rejected His people?

Romans 9:6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed ...

Romans 9:6 is clearly based on the statement of Isaiah. If you look carefully at where Paul quotes from throughout this section you will find that he is greatly influenced by the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is a major source for Paul in this section of his epistle.

Isaiah 59:20 (English Standard Version) "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD.

21 "And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and forevermore."

As far as Paul was concerned, the Word of God is a VERY sure thing. He also refers to:

Isaiah 40:8 (English Standard Version) The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

It is rather interesting that in Romans 11:34 Paul returns to Isaiah 40:

Romans 11:34 "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?"

Isaiah 40:13 Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel?

14 Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?

The words of Isaiah create an *inclusio* to what Paul is saying in this section. This concept of "the word" reappears throughout this section of Scripture.

Romans 10:6 (English Standard Version) But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)

7 or "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" ...

Once again he is referring back to Isaiah 59.

8 ... (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

Who really are the children of Abraham? Being a child of Abraham is not a matter of DNA. It is by "seed" (Greek: *spermata*). The natural thing is to think of that as being very physical.

Genesis 21:12 establishes that Isaac is the TRUE seed of Abraham. The children of promise are the true seed of Abraham.

Genesis 21:12 ... in Isaac your seed shall be called.

Romans 9:7 nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called."

8 That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

Paul establishes an opposition between the children of the promise and the children of the flesh. We are not just talking about the physical. We are talking about the flesh as expressed in Romans chapter eight where Paul contrasts the works of the flesh, human nature, as opposed to the Spirit of God, God's Holy Spirit. When he is talking about the flesh, he is not talking about someone's natural child. He is not talking about handing on the family genes in terms of physical begetting. He is making a contrast between two opposing ways of life, the way of the Spirit and, for want of a better term, the way of Satan.

The flesh has been treated negatively in Romans chapter eight by its contrast with living according to the Spirit. The unspoken premise is that those who live according to the Spirit, as per Romans chapter eight, are, in fact, the children of promise, the true seed of Abraham. That accords with Paul's comment in Galatians chapter three. The children of promise, the true descendants of Abraham are those who are begotten by God's Holy Spirit as opposed to those who live according to the flesh.

In Romans 10:6-8 it is interesting to see where Paul says "the word" is located. It is not in a book on a bookshelf. It's not on a hard drive on a computer! It is not on a flash-drive on a USB connection. It is not in a museum. It is in your mouth - and more than that, it is in your HEART! The children of promise have the Word of God in their heart! The heart was seen as the seat of the emotive aspects of a human being, that guided a human being.

Jeremiah 31:31 "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -

32 "not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.

33 "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Jeremiah 31 talks about the way in which God's covenant was to be written on the fleshly tablets of the heart, the soft tender heart, that is malleable, that is able to accept the instruction of God as opposed to the hardened stone-like heart that ancient Israel had. Jeremiah 17:1 describes that:

**Jeremiah 17:1 "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron;
With the point of a diamond it is engraved
On the tablet of their heart,
And on the horns of your altars,**

The Children of Israel had a heart which had to be engraved by a steel pen with a diamond nib! Jeremiah understood something about metallurgy and science. Clearly, up until recent days diamond has been the hardest thing that you could use to grind or engrave material. He said, "These people are so hard they have to have a diamond nib to engrave anything on them."

But we are supposed to have a fleshly tablet of the heart on which God's Word can be engraved, and it can envelope it, consume it, become part of it and motivate it. Whatever it does is motivated by the Word of God. The true children of promise have the Word of God in their heart.

Don't feel that I am trying to encourage you to go home and memorise the Old Testament so that you can keep up with the apostle Paul! If you wish to do that, well and good. I am sure most of us don't have the time for that, but we are supposed to have God's Word in our heart. We are supposed to know enough of it so that it's there and we can call upon it, and we can use it just as the people listening to Paul or listening to a rabbi in the days gone by would be able to recall it out of their memory and say, "Yes, he is speaking about Abraham from Genesis."

Certainly they wouldn't have said, "He is referring to Genesis 21," because Genesis 21 didn't exist then. It was just "the book of Genesis" - but they knew whereabouts it was in the story of the book of Genesis.

The heart was seen as the seat of emotion. What motivated a person? What drove a person? We often talk about it in terms of the mind today. The Bible talks about it in terms of the heart.

The promise was through Isaac and not through Ishmael. Isaac was the child of promise. Interestingly, Abraham had other children. He had Ishmael, but as far as God was concerned, Ishmael was not the child of promise. Paul mentions that:

Romans 9:9 For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son."

... referring to Genesis 18 and the promise that Sarah would have a son and that HE would be the child of promise. It didn't just finish there because Abraham had other children by Keturah which had no part in the explanation. Abraham had many descendants by Ishmael, but God is not concerned about that. He is only interested in Isaac who was miraculously born.

Paul doesn't finish there because God makes it a little more pointed:

10 And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac

11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil ...

There is no such thing as "original sin." These children were wrestling in the womb. They were cramped. My wife has not had twins but I can imagine what it is like. It gets a bit tight in there and there is a bit of jostling going on.

11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls),
12 it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger."

The Eternal was telling Rebekah and Isaac, "You have two sons." These two sons were also born miraculously because it would appear that Rebekah was barren and could not conceive. The Eternal intervened and gave them two children. But even then He said, "I am choosing just one of these boys."

13 As it is written (he quotes from Malachi), "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

This is an interesting case, because here we have the question of election or calling in verse 11, and then Paul quotes from Malachi chapter one. If we read a few more verses in Malachi chapter one, we see that

Malachi is talking about calling as well. This aspect of "Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated," is not a matter of dislike for the other person. It is a matter that Esau was the one that God was NOT going to call at this point in time.

Does it end there? It's interesting to consider what is important in terms of God. What is important is not WHO you are or what you are but that God calls who is to be the elect or the firstfruits! Paul establishes very clearly that God is in the business of CALLING individuals.

In families He called one son. It is interesting that in so doing Paul highlights another factor. Who was it that God worked with? Who was the stronger, Ishmael or Isaac? Ishmael was the stronger. He had a 13-year head start on Isaac. In Genesis we see that Ishmael taunts and provokes Isaac. As a result of that, he and his mother get thrown out of the family camp. Isaac was a little child. He was the weak one of the two.

What about Jacob and Esau? I think we have to conclude from Scripture that Esau was a "man's man." He was a hunter out with his bow and arrow or his spear. He was a person who a man would consider a man. Jacob was a bit of a "mummy's boy." I think we could classify him as being weak.

What about when we come down to Jacob's family? Who gets chosen? Joseph is chosen instead of Reuben or Judah or Levi. Joseph is one of the weak, the marginalised, the outsider in terms of his brothers.

What about Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim? Manasseh was the older, but God chose Ephraim to be the leader. I don't want you to deduce all sorts of things from that. I am trying to point out that God is constantly calling the weaker to do His work!

Why did He call Moses when he had a big strapping brother, Aaron? What was wrong with Aaron? Aaron didn't get born with the "Sword of Damocles" hanging over his head, and a genocide order that he should be destroyed. Moses was! Who was the weaker?

When God is choosing His calling, He is calling the weak. God reveals the weak are the ones He works with. Why? It is so that we can't glory in our own greatness. God is not interested in our greatness because His greatness is so much GREATER than ours!

What is Paul telling us? God is not trying to save everyone at this point in time. Up until that point in time, not everyone had had a place in God's plan. Very few people had. So Paul develops a scenario in which those who live by the flesh are the children of Ishmael. They are still the children of Abraham because Ishmael was a son of Abraham, but they are not the children of promise that God was concerned about.

Interestingly in this chapter, Paul really develops for us the idea of WHY God chose the weak. He chose the weak so that He could show Himself strong. As far as God and Satan are concerned, there is no contest! Paul wants us to appreciate that. This is not a contest between two superpowers waging war with one another on a map of the world. This is no "Risk" Game. If God wants to call someone He can create them in their mother's womb if necessary so that they have life.

Let me digress again for you because of a "bandwagon" at the present time. Most people like to reject the New Testament for two reasons: the virgin birth and the resurrection.

Let's talk about the virgin birth. What is so strange about a virgin birth when the Eternal has done it many times? Now, Isaac wasn't a virgin birth; the Eternal lets us know that Abraham had a part in it. But Abraham had nothing to offer, so the Eternal had to give him something to contribute to the equation as well. He was past age and so the Eternal had to make his body become sexually alive again so that he could provide the sperm for Isaac to be born. He had to do the same for Sarah.

What is the difference between that and God the Father allowing the Holy Spirit to plant the sperm in the womb of Mary? Is there any difference? It's the same thing. There is no human man involved, but so what? How did Samson get born? He was born exactly the same way because his parents were both barren. The Eternal had to intervene in their lives to give birth to Samson.

What about Samuel?

Jeremiah says, "When I was in my mother's womb, You knew me." He was known by God from his mother's womb. I wonder if Jeremiah is saying a little more there, that he also was a miracle baby just as some of these other people that God chose were miracle babies?

God calls people to do His work. I am sure Isaac was abundantly clear about the involvement of God in his life. Jacob certainly came to learn about that in due course and came to appreciate that.

So Paul develops a scenario in which those people who live by the flesh are the children of Ishmael while those called and who live according to the Spirit are the true children of promise, the true seed of Abraham.

I think it is abundantly clear that God has never been in any contest to see who can win the most to a particular way of thinking. There is no contest in any shape or form. Paul then asks:

14 (English Standard Version) What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!

Is God an unjust God? Why does He do it this way? Why does He disregard the child who can be born normally and give the blessings to a child who is born miraculously? Aah! Therein is the lesson that most people overlook, because:

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."

Because the time is almost up, I want you to go home and read the section of Scripture that that quotation comes from because Paul is making a very profound statement about God's purposes! God is doing something for a very great reason. You can probably find from your marginal reference that it comes from Exodus chapter 33. I would like you to read that entire chapter and the first ten verse of Exodus 34. See how frequently the key word in verse 15 appears in those two chapters and what God has to say about that key word in terms of His dealing with Israel.

16 (New King James Version) So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

This whole exercise is an exercise by God in revealing to us and revealing to all humanity what His character is really like! You can't systematise that character. You can't reproduce it in a test-tube. You have to build it by understanding and by building a relationship with God.

Paul is dealing with one particular aspect of God's character. The whole purpose is for us to come to understand something about God. You and I have the opportunity of learning that at this point in time so that WE can help other people recognise it in the World Tomorrow and in the Great White Throne Judgment. We are called here now to learn about the very character of God. We are here because of God's character, not because of who we are or where we came from. We have been called to be children of Abraham.

God's calling is based upon His own purpose, but that purpose is based on His compassionate character. Read Exodus 33 and 34 from the point of view of coming to understand the COMPASSIONATE character of God and of His son Jesus Christ.

When Jesus Christ shed tears over Jerusalem, I don't think it was the first time He had cried about what this creation has done to itself. He desires to rescue it from itself.

Paul is showing that God's purpose is based on His compassionate character and desire to show mercy. It is not a matter of capriciousness but of God's purpose and God's plan; how God is going about bringing people to Himself.

As Paul shows, that purpose is shown in the Exodus and the confrontation with Pharaoh.

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

... even as an act of mercy.

I could ask you to read from Exodus chapter three through to Exodus chapter 12. I don't want to put too much upon you, but maybe you would like to think of this: find out what Pharaoh's view of God was in the first place and what God was attempting to do with Pharaoh and with the Egyptians in what they went through in Egypt. Was it just, "Sock it to them! Beat them up! Make pulp out of them!"?

They got pulverised. They got hurt. But the end result was that they learned something about the God of Israel that Israel also learned, albeit for a short period of time. They never allowed it to be internalised. It never got committed into their long-term memory. It didn't get put in their heart to motivate them and move them as they were.

The purpose of that confrontation with Pharaoh was that all Egypt should know that God is God alone. Read Exodus chapters three and four and see what Pharaoh's boast was at the beginning of the whole exercise. There was a change of tables. Those people came to know something.

The end result of what Paul is talking about here in this section of Scripture is that people have the opportunity of becoming part of the seed of Abraham, the TRUE seed of Abraham, the seed of promise, the descendants of Isaac, of Jacob and of Joseph and so forth.

If we move forward, the end result is summed up in a very interesting section in which Paul raises a parable of what God is doing in terms of an olive tree. Talking of Israel he said:

Romans 11:11 I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles.

God has allowed something to happen to the Children of Israel, to the people who, by birth were descendants of Abraham and Isaac, but really in terms of God's perspective were children of the flesh, and, by God's definition, children of Ishmael.

12 Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!

13 For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,

14 if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them.

15 For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

He said that these people are cast away but they ARE going to have an opportunity to accept. Is this a second chance? No, because they never understood it. They were people of the flesh. They had a hard, stony heart. It is only when you have a fleshly tablet of the heart on which can be engraved the Word of God, that you can accept.

16 For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

17 And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree,

18 do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.

Paul uses this wonderful example of pruning and grafting - but it is totally contrary to what you graft for! I don't know how many of you have grafted fruit trees or roses or flowers and various things of that

nature. What Paul is talking about is totally contrary to what you graft for. Normally you put a good graft into a tree because the branch brings forth the types of fruit or blooms that you want.

But Paul is saying, "No, that is not the way it is in THIS case." Something is grafted in, not to bring forth its OWN fruit, but to bring forth the fruit of the ROOT to which it is now connected. And if it doesn't bring forth the fruit of the root, it ALSO will be pruned and removed.

19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in."

20 Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear.

Have a respect to what has been offered to you!

21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.

God may decide that you have no part in His plan because you are not prepared to produce the fruit that He desires you bring forth!

22 Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

23 And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in ...

This is an interesting concept! God pruned branches off because they weren't producing the right fruit. He said, "These are children of the flesh. I don't want these on my tree. But they have the chance to change, and they have the chance to be grafted back in so that NOW they produce the fruit that comes from the root stock."

He said, "If they do not continue in unbelief ..." - in other words some change takes place in these people whereby suddenly they realise, "I am not living the life that I should be living. I have to change," they will be grafted in.

23 ... will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.

People write great lengths about this section of Scripture. They talk about "double predestination." "You are predestined to be grafted in and you are predestined to be grafted out." That is bizarre!

But when you look at the plan of God and you put Paul's comments about these people being grafted in together with other Scriptures like Revelation 20 and the book of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones, then suddenly these chapters all start to make sense.

We don't have to get caught up in some of the great arguments that people get caught up in, in terms of this section of Scripture.

While Paul doesn't directly address the aspect of resurrection in this section, his understanding of the resurrection is clearly set out for us in 1st Corinthians 15. Mr Hulme has a lead article about the resurrection in the August 2007 issue of the *Church of God News*. He spoke at some length about the aspect in 1st Corinthians 15 where there was a correct order of resurrections whereby people will be brought back to life again and they will have the opportunity as Paul says:

26 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written ...

The opportunity will be for all Israel to be saved. It is quite an incredible scenario. Paul introduces this idea of the olive tree and the olive tender coming round and cutting branches off because they are not spiritual branches. What do husbandmen do with branches they cut off because they don't want them? I think they normally get burned or pulverised to make mulch for the ground somewhere else on the property.

But it is as though the Eternal is putting these aside and saying, "There's a pile of dead branches over there. I am KEEPING those because one of these days I am going to give them life again! I am going to plug them back in and they are going to produce the fruit that I desired them to produce." This is something that comes about as a result of the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

***26 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:
"The Deliverer will come out of Zion,
And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;
27 For this is My covenant with them,
When I take away their sins."***

He goes on to talk about those things. But bear that in mind. When you read these things that the apostle Paul says, go back and seek to understand them in their greater context, rather than just the chapter in which he is expressing these things.

God is working out a plan here. The apostle Paul understood that. He did not set it out in the way in which you and I may set it out today in terms of an article in *Vision* or in *Foundations* or in the *Church of God News* or even in a sermon. But he understood it. He understood what God's purpose was and he understood above all else that God wants each and every human being within His creation to come to have and understand and inculcate within their lives and express within their lives HIS very character.

What He has done in calling you and me to be here at this time is an expression of His compassionate concern for ALL of His creation. Let's never lose sight of that!

*... Peter Nathan
27 Sep 07*

[Back to Top](#)

[Back to Sermon Summary List](#)