

Sermon from August 12, 2012

"The Mystery and Majesty of Freedom"

Romans 10:14-15

We have been worshiping God in a special way this summer. We have been thinking about the doctrine of election. The sermons have been an invitation to go deep into the mystery and majesty of God.

I have tried not to be argumentative. I have not belittled people I disagree with. I have said what you didn't expect me to say, and I have allowed God Himself and not what I say about God to be the mystery.

The first sermon in the series set the tone of these sermons. Here's the idea that set the tone. Faced with the mystery and majesty of divine election knowledge puffs up; love builds up. In saying that I am taking my cue from the Apostle Paul.

The Paul We Need to Know

Some people love to hate the Apostle Paul. They accuse him of demeaning women, of being quick to lose his temper, of corrupting Jesus' simple message, and of using improper language. Some accusations are false, and some are true. He was the kind of man who divided the room, when he walked in. You loved him, or you hated him. Don't form *your* opinion of him without giving Romans 9-11 a generous hearing.

Not all but many of Paul's fellow Jews had rejected the love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul was not just disappointed; he faced a theological problem so big that it shook him to his core. How could God's elect turn away from the eternal purpose of their election? Paul had to ask the unthinkable: did God's eternal purpose fail, because they didn't believe?

It wasn't a theoretical question. It gave Paul anguish. Romans 9:2-3: **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.** The man who could divide the room just by walking in had those feelings. Paul didn't write about election to show how smart he was. He wrote to find relief for his aching heart.

We see it again in Romans 10:1: **Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.** That strong emotion is why I say that faced with the mystery and majesty of election, knowledge puffs up; love builds up. Love doesn't have all the answers, but it helps people find some answers.

Q & A

Now, the reality is this: when faced with the mystery and majesty of election, we want knowledge. We have questions, and we want answers. Here are four questions we have asked so far this summer, and some of the answers to those questions.

God's act of election causes the questions. God chooses one person instead of another person. He chose Abraham instead of anyone else on earth. He chose Abraham's son, Isaac, instead of Abraham's son, Ishmael. He chose Isaac's son, Jacob, instead of Isaac's son, Esau. After that, God chose the descendants of Jacob, Israel, and no other to carry forward God's purpose in the world.

Question #1: **Is God unjust?** Is preferring one person over another really right? What right does God have to prefer one person to another? Everyone is equal. Individual freedom must be respected. Everyone deserves an equal opportunity. It's unfair to exclude people. You can almost feel righteous indignation getting up a head of steam in this objection.

Paul's first answer is verse 15 where he quotes Exodus 33:19. God said to Moses: **"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."** If you are questioning the justice of God, because He chooses one person instead of another and one nation instead of any other, I hope it takes the edge off your question to know that God does that to extend mercy.

Verse 17 goes further. **I (God) raised you (Pharaoh) up . . . that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."** Please hear me: Election is not God's unfair way of excluding people. It is God's way of making sure that mercy goes to ever-widening circles of humanity.

That brings us to Question #2. Suppose choosing one person or nation over another is just, why did God choose such unpromising people? Abraham had feet of clay at times. Isaac comes across as painfully ordinary, and his favoritism toward his son, Esau, had disastrous consequences in his family. Jacob on any reading of Genesis was a stinker. The Old Testament bears witness that Israel was a recalcitrant lot.

Paul gave the same answer twice. Verses 11b-12a say: **God's purpose in election will stand: not by works but by him who calls.** Verse 14 says: **It (God's purpose) does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.** God elects unpromising people in order to demonstrate that the success of His purpose depends on Him, and not on the people he chooses.

Question #3: What is God's purpose? God's purpose, as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob received it, was that **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring** – Genesis 12:3, Genesis 26:4, and Genesis 28:14.

We have an even clearer understanding of God's purpose. **God so loved the world that he elected three unpromising men and the unpromising community of their descendants to carry forward His purpose in the world, so from that community, when the time was ripe, God could give his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.**

Question #4 arises out of the dark side of election. Romans 9:18 says that **God hardens whom he wants to harden.** Hardening means that God acts on certain people so that they will refuse to do what is best for them. Here's Question #4: **Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?** "If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and there was nothing Pharaoh could do about it, why blame Pharaoh for his actions?"

Two weeks ago, we read six verses in book of Exodus that reported the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. Three times it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and three times it says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So, which was it? Exodus clearly leaves God in control, and just as clearly Exodus takes nothing away from human responsibility. Pharaoh did something to justify God's hardening. I believe Exodus said it both ways as a subtle reminder that we are in the presence of mystery. Is there any greater mystery than how the freedom of God and the freedom of Man work together?

Paradox

1600 years ago, an unknown Christian theologian expressed the mystery we are dealing with here. He said: "Without God we can't; without us He won't." The Apostle Paul said the same in Philippians 2:12-13: **Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.** That makes it seem like everything depends on us until verse 13: **for it is God who works in you to will and do what pleases him.** That makes it seem that everything depends on God. Without God we can't; without us He won't. Bingo!

Let's look at how that idea plays out in Romans 9-10, first in Romans 9. Verse 9: **For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I (God) will return, and Sarah will have a son."** The initiative in choosing Isaac lay with God alone.

Verses 11a and 12b: **Yet, before the twins (Jacob and Esau) were born or had done anything good or bad . . . she (their mother, Rebekah,) was told, "The older will serve the younger."** Once again, the initiative in choosing Jacob lay with God alone.

Verse 17: **For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."** The initiative in using Pharaoh and hardening Pharaoh's heart to accomplish his purpose lay with God alone.

Verse 21: **Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?** How much more strongly could the apostle express the unrivaled initiative of God in human affairs?

God intends to bless all the nations of the earth through Jesus Christ, but without Him that doesn't happen. He has the purpose. He chooses. He hardens. He sends Christ. Without Him the divine purpose fails. Be content with this mystery: Without Him we can't; but without us He won't.

Now, step into Romans 10 and feel the power of that last statement. Verse 3: **Since they disregarded the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.** The verbs express human freedom and responsibility: **disregarded . . . sought to establish . . . did not submit.** The freedom of Man is on display.

Verse 9: **If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Confess with your mouth and believe in your heart:** irreducibly human choices.

Verse 13: **Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.** Calling on the name of the name of the Lord rises from the inner sanctum of human freedom and responsibility and has eternal consequences.

Verses 14-15 link a series of freely chosen actions, and they form the indispensable pathway to achieving God’s eternal purpose in this world. Watch the verbs. **How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?** And that word brings us back to God’s initiative.

God intends to bless all the nations of the earth through Jesus Christ, but without us that doesn’t happen. We go, we preach, we hear, we believe, and we call on His name. Without us the divine purpose fails. Be content with this mystery: Without us He won’t; but without Him we can’t.

A Tribute

God has elected a community of faith to carry forward His purpose in the world. He has made the success of His purpose depend on Him in the general hope of getting things done. And He leaves enormous responsibility in our hands to figure out how to do it. He helps us; He doesn’t do it for us. It has been quite a story for the past 3000 years.

I’d like to pay tribute to a part of that story that is being forgotten, and I’d like to reflect on BVBC’s part in that story. I don’t know what you think about Christian missionaries. You may have heard that they imposed Western ideas on other cultures and destroyed the environment and justified colonialism. If that’s all you know you should delete it. It is false or distorted, and is comparable to believing the earth is flat.

Many missionaries have heard the verses we read in Romans 10:14-15 as a call from God to leave the familiar and the comfortable and expend their lives to plant churches, build schools and hospitals, and bring Western medicine to people groups on every continent. Unlike American diplomats who cannot usually speak the language of the countries they visit, missionaries became fluent in at least one and usually more than one language of the people they lived with. And they lived with them and cried with them and died with them and buried their loved ones with them. As a result, there are more African Christians south of the Sahara Desert than there are people in the United States. The Church in South Korea now sends out more missionaries than does the Church in the United States. So powerfully did Romans 10 grip Christian imagination.

We in this congregation of the elect already speak the language of our country. We live with our people, cry with them, die with them, and bury our loved ones here. We see the disintegrating forces in our culture. We feel them in our bones. We see what they do to our children. Do you not feel yourself to be a new minority in this secular culture? Do you really think there is a political solution to what troubles you most?

The Bible says that Christ died for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age. (Galatians 1:3-4) How can people call on this Christ to rescue them if they don’t believe in Him? How can they believe if they never hear about Him? How can they hear, if no one tells them? How will people tell them, unless they feel sent by God to do it?

I am hopeful. God is at work in this unpromising culture. I am hopeful when I hear about Jennifer Gale’s Alpha Group at her place of work. I am hopeful when I hear of conversations about Christ Keith Brady has with colleagues. I am hopeful when Art Brosius has a chance to talk to university students about faith and morality in business. I am hopeful when I see Simon and Jill Shute’s faithfulness in holding Alpha Groups. I am hopeful when I see 250 children in VBS and 80 teenagers and adults ministering in Maine, Boston, and Jamaica. I am pleased when I see our preschool at capacity. I am hopeful when I pray for people who are seeking to share Christ in their neighborhood. I am hopeful when I see Darby Biasotto want to give herself to children in Uganda with her parents’ blessing. I am hopeful when I see Kelsy Friedkin studying at Moody Bible Institute and serving teenagers at BVBC this summer. I am hopeful when I hear of young men in our congregation wanting to give themselves to the ministry.

The doctrine of election means that God comes quietly into our lives and makes unmistakable contact with real people. When He does that, anything can happen, because God is in control. He has a merciful purpose, and He is going to achieve His purpose in all the nations on earth, and the human mess will not thwart it. Without God we can’t, but we don’t always see God’s hand. He can be very quiet when He works. But we can see evidence of His work in the examples I have enumerated, because without us He won’t. So, I say to you what Jesus said of old: **In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! Christ has overcome the world** – John 16:33.