

We have a problem. Listen to this: **“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”** – Malachi 1:2-3. The prophet Malachi placed those words in the mouth of God. The Apostle Paul quoted them approvingly in making an important point (Romans 9:13). Is that hate speech? I see no hope for this sermon unless I redirect the emotions aroused by those three words in the mouth of God: **“Esau I hated.”**

To do this I need to talk about the past, but are impatient with the past. We feel superior to the past. Our impatient snobbery makes it hard to hear the wisdom our ancestors offer. Don't be impatient. Don't be a snob. Let me help. Here's how.

Did you see the TV commercial about a teenage boy, who had just had a fender-bender with his dad's expensive car? He said to his friend, who was riding with him, “My dad's going to kill me.” How many times have you heard someone say that? “If I don't remember our anniversary, my wife's going to kill me.” How many times have you said that? “If I don't get that report on my boss's desk by Monday, she's going to kill me.”

Really? Do that teenage boy, that husband, and that employee stand in danger of deadly force being used against them? Of course not! It's a habit of speech, and no one takes it literally. It just means that someone is going to be very unhappy with you, and you don't look forward to the confrontation. That's how we talk.

Other human beings use language in the same way. The word *hate* in Malachi and Romans does not mean the animosity that wishes to do irreparable harm to another person. We are not dealing with hate speech here. To say that God hated Esau was a habit of speech, and no one took it literally. It just meant that God did not choose Esau to carry forward His divine purpose in the world. But God had good things in store for him too. Keep that in mind as Romans 9 takes us further into the mystery and majesty of election.

Isaac Not Ishmael

Let's read verses 6-9. **It is not as though God's word had failed.** Not all but many Jews of Paul's generation refused Jesus as the long-expected Messiah of Israel. But it was the elect, the chosen people of God who refused. 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 asked the unthinkable: did God's eternal purpose fail? Paul's answer to that question begins in verse 6.

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. That is not at all clear. Verse seven tries to clarify it. **Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, “Through Isaac shall your offspring come.”** I thought your children were your descendants. It's still not clear.

Paul tried again in verse eight to clear things up. **In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.** Paul made a distinction between **natural children** and **children of the promise**. The meaning is still not clear.

Verse nine is Paul's last try at making it clear. He identifies the promise he was talking about. **For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah shall have a son”** – Genesis 18:10, 14.

You know the problem we are having here? Paul wrote to people who knew the Old Testament better than we do. He could take for granted that they knew certain things that I can't take for granted that we know. That's okay as long as we don't remain in the dark about the relevant background in the book of Genesis. Let's try to fix that.

Now Sarai was barren; she had no children – Genesis 11:30. It is an old, human sorrow. The Bible says God often gave special privileges to women who couldn't have a child. He was about to do that for Sarah.

The Lord had said to Abram, "I will make you into a great nation" – Genesis 12:1-2. I wonder how Abraham felt about that. After all, he was short on the one thing a nation needs, people. He had no children.

As the years went by, you could watch Abraham start to scramble. **And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir"** – Genesis 15:3. Not very satisfying, but completely legal!

His wife, Sarah, being the resourceful thing she was, took matters into her own hands. **Sarai said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." . . . Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael** – Genesis 16:2,16. We with our sperm banks and surrogate mothers can probably be more sympathetic with Sarah's desperate strategy than any previous generation in Western Civilization.

That should have settled matters. It did not. **God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife . . . I will bless her and give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her"** – Genesis 17:16. God, being more resourceful than Sarah, had a better idea.

Then, it happened. **Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing?"** – Genesis 17:17-18. Abraham was feeling his age.

So was Sarah the Resourceful. **Then the Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." . . . So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"** – Genesis 18:10, 12. It was a conspiracy of mirth, conceived in bitterness and born in unbelief.

Should we laugh or tremble, as we recognize ourselves in what happened next? **Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did."** – Genesis 18:13-15.

25 years after their odyssey with God began, Abraham and Sarah reached a milestone. **Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him** – Genesis 21:1-3.

Jacob Not Esau

Act 2 Scene 1 should sound familiar. **Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren.** It is an old, human sorrow. The Bible says God often gave special privileges to women who couldn't have a child. He was about to do that for Rebekah, and it didn't take 25 years to answer Jacob's prayers.

The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her. The babies? One would have been nice, but

two? **The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?”** She was not the last mother of multiples to ask that question. **So she went to inquire of the Lord.**

The Lord said to her: “Two nations are in your womb, and two people from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” – Genesis 25:21-23.

Judging from the long and messy story that followed, Isaac ignored what Rebekah said God said to her. Rebekah on the other hand, being resourceful like her mother-in-law, set out to make sure that her older son, Esau, who was her husband’s favorite boy, would serve his younger brother, Jacob, who was her favorite boy.

You can read their Semitic soap opera in Genesis 27-33 and see the sordid way in which the older, Esau, came to serve the younger. In terms of possessions, it would be hard to say which man ended up with the most toys, and Jacob definitely got the short end of the stick in terms of personal hardships. But Genesis makes it crystal clear that in one definitive way God preferred Jacob.

Genesis 28:12-15: **He (Jacob, fleeing for his life from his brother, Esau) had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said, “I am the Lord the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”**

They were the same promises God had made to Abraham and Isaac. That’s why Paul in Romans 9 called Isaac and Jacob **children of the promise**. By making those promises to those men, God chose them to carry forward His purpose in the world. We now have a way to begin building our understanding of the doctrine of election.

The Meaning of Election

Psalms 33:11 says: **The plans of the Lord stand firm forever; the purposes of his heart through all generations.** But how does God achieve His purpose in our world? He does it by the method of election.

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.

But why did God choose such unpromising people to carry forward His purpose? 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. God didn’t choose those three men people or that nation because of their superior moral character.

So, why choose them? Paul answered in Romans 9:11b-12a: God chose such unpromising people **in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by**

works but by him who calls. God elects people regardless of their moral character to carry forward His purpose in the world in order to demonstrate that the success of His purpose depends on Him, and not on the people he chooses.

That raises another question. What is God's purpose? God's purpose, as Jacob received it, was that **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring** – Genesis 28:14. God made the same promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and renewed it to Isaac in Genesis 26:4.

We today can sharpen our 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.**

God's love inspires the idea that sets the tone for these sermons on election, and it needs to set the tone for discussions of this doctrine. Faced with the mystery and majesty of election knowledge puffs up; love builds up.

So, one more time here's where our understanding of the doctrine of election stands as of right now. God elected three unpromising men and the unpromising community of their descendants to bless all the nations on earth; and He chose unpromising people to carry that purpose in order demonstrate that the success of His purpose depends on Him, and not on the people he chooses.

This is the beginning of our understanding. We'll expand our understanding throughout the summer, as the Bible takes us deep into the majesty and mystery of God.

Carriers of Eternal Purpose

My dream is not a BVBC that becomes a mega church or always enjoys a good relationship with the secular community around us. My dream is a BVBC that knows itself to be a part of that unpromising community of Abraham's spiritual descendants, who embody and carry out the purpose of God to bless all the nations on earth. That is what we are, and I have asked Matt Ousdahl to tell you a story of how we do that.