

“The Book of Romans: An Open Invitation”

Today we're in week seven of our series in the book of Romans. If you have your Bibles, go ahead and open to chapter nine. We're in chapters nine and ten today, looking at some challenging and, yet, important verses (and passages) to understand.

This study in the book of Romans, for us as a Lutheran Church, is an appropriate one, especially on a day like today which is being remembered and celebrated (throughout the world) as Reformation Day. If you remember the history, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, which led to the beginning of what (we know) today as the Protestant Reformation.

This study fits in well because, for Luther, the theological discoveries he made (that led to) the Reformation were the result of his study of the book of Romans. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul laid out for those early believers and (lays out) for us (today) how God, in Christ, has done all that is needed for our salvation. We are saved (from our sin), we are justified, (made right) with God, by the grace of God, through our faith in Jesus.

This foundational doctrine (or teaching) from Scripture, of how it all happens, was (for Luther) like a burden being lifted, the weight of his sin (which he knew so well) was finally taken off his shoulders (and conscience) and carried by someone else...and that someone else was Jesus Christ.

We're not focusing (today) on the Reformation. (We're in chapters nine and ten in Romans.) But we are dealing with (in these chapters) a couple of key understandings, (fundamental ways) in which God is at work to save his world.

Now, we don't have time to go back and summarize all that Paul has said (thus far) in the first eight chapters, but I believe it's fair to say that chapter nine (in the book of Romans) comes after chapter eight for good reason. And I'm not talking about the chapter numbers, but about the content that's found in each of the numbered chapters. Chapter eight is central to our faith as Christians. It's foundational to our understanding of how God works and how (in his work) he's working for us.

If you were here last week, you remember what we said about what “we know” about God and about the world in which we live. We said that “we know” that life is hard. We know that things in this life are not what God wants them to be. Paul says that...and we know that. (We all have stories.) We also know that in (all things) God works for good. God is on our side. He's not against us. Jesus is the proof...his willingness to go to the cross. As Christians, we know that. It's foundational to our faith.

If you were here (last week), you remember what we talked about. If you weren't, I'd encourage you to go on-line and listen, because it not only sets-up what we're talking about today, but it sets-up how we can and we should (as followers of Jesus) see (and come) at all of life. It's that important.

Chapter nine and chapter ten follow what Paul said in chapter eight, and not just in the chapter numbers, but in the content of what he's laying out. There are two big “theological” concepts (or ideas) in these chapters that I want us to go after today. The first is the whole idea of God's “election” of people, how God chooses (or elects) those he is going to save. God chooses us in Christ. God's elects us for eternity. (That's the first.)

The second concept (or idea) has to do with how this all happens, how his (saving-election) takes place and how (in Jesus) God has chosen to work to save his world. God's “election” for salvation and how God works (in this world) to save us in Christ.

Let's take them one at a time, starting with God's election. In chapter nine (and we read parts of it today), it's clear (from the outset) that Paul cares deeply about his Jewish sisters and brothers who have yet to come to know Christ. His heart is breaking in the opening verses. And it's breaking because, (of all people), they should have been the very ones who would have easily (and readily) come to faith. They had all the advantages.

Paul goes down the list. They were the chosen people, Israel, adopted (by God) as sons. They had the covenants, all of the agreements (God had made), the promises. They were the ones who had received God's

commands, (his commandments) directly, through Moses. They had the temple. They had the worship. They had all of the things that should have (so naturally) led them to Christ.

Not only that, but they had the patriarchs themselves, (Abraham and Isaac and Jacob) and all the rest. They had the kings. They had the judges. They had the prophets. They had the very ancestry that led to the birth of Jesus. Of all people (Paul says), they should have (and could have) been the first to come to faith in Christ, but they didn't, and his heart is breaking (in this chapter), because they were his own people and he so desperately wanted them to know.

In talking about what (they had) and they have, Paul speaks of the way in which God has chosen to work. He points to the Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah (as an example) and of how God chose to work through Isaac (and not Ishmael), even though both sons were from the same father, and Ishmael was born first. God chose Isaac to be the one through whom he would work. He chose him. He selected him. He "elected" him (if you will), instead of the other.

And he did so, in order that the promise of salvation would be not by works, but (by grace) through faith. Paul says, "For this is how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time, I will return, and Sarah will have a son.'" A son of promise, a son of selection, a son of "election" by a God saves us all in Christ.

It was same thing with Isaac and (his wife) Rebekah. When she gave birth to their twins, God chose Jacob instead of Esau. He selected (or elected) the younger (unexpected son) to be the heir, instead of the anticipated older brother. It would be through this younger son, Jacob, the one God chose, that the nation of Israel would be born, and through that (same nation) eventually would come the Christ.

All of that to say, that this concept of God's election to salvation is nothing new. It's the pattern and process God has been using from the start.

Jesus refers to it in Matthew's gospel when he talks about what's going to happen (on the other end) when the world comes to an end. He says, (at that time) "He (Jesus) will send his angels with a loud trumpet call and he will gather his elect...from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matthew 24:31).

It's the same thing in Mark's gospel, in talking about the distress and turmoil of those last days, (he says) "If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom God has chosen, he has shortened them" (Mark 13:20).

Peter says something similar in his first letter. (He says), "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. To God's elect, strangers in this world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, (and now listen closely), who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood" (1 Peter 1:1-2).

Sound familiar? (If you were here last week, it should.) Chapter eight comes before chapter nine for a reason. It's the same language Paul used (last week) in chapter eight, when he spoke of how "those God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son...And those he predestined (remember), he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

Remember what we said? God's foreknowledge, his ability to see all of history, all of your life, everything that has happened and is happening and will happen, all at once – his foreknowledge allows (or enables) him to predestine or preordain or select or "elect" those he will save in Christ.

In other words, God doesn't plan this all out before it happens (and he sees it), but because he can see it (and know it) before it happens, he can use what happens and what will happen in his choosing and selecting and "electing" peoples and individuals into his kingdom.

God elected the nation of Israel. God selected the ones through whom his promise would continue. Not in an exclusionary way, but in a way that was designed to include everyone. In choosing Isaac over Ishmael, God was not (excluding Ishmael) from the promise, as much as he was choosing Isaac for a purpose. In allowing Jacob to become the heir instead of Esau, in no way was Esau kept from knowing and loving God.

God includes, but he never excludes. He selects and "elects," but he does not disregard or discount the value of anyone he has created. In that sense, God is sovereign, but he is not arbitrary. He knows everything there is to know, but he does not randomly pick and choose for no reason. His reason for picking and choosing, for selecting and "electing", is for no other reason than to lead people to Christ.

God elected the (Jewish people), the nation of Israel, so that the rest of the world (the Gentiles) would come to know Jesus. He selected or "elected" the twelve disciples, so that through those disciples (when they became apostles) he would begin and build and grow his Church.

There's a reason God is an electing God, and that reason (going back to chapter eight) is for his glory and for our good. And that leads to chapter nine in which (Paul) talks about God's "electing" process, the saving plan he has been using from the start...which leads to chapter ten which makes all of what we have been talking about (thus far) relevant and important and (21st century) for us.

Look at how chapter ten starts, (verse one), it says, "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. (It's the same anguish we heard in chapter nine.) For I can testify about them (he says) that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ (he says) is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

Paul says, they didn't know. (He says), they were operating under a (false promise) and premise. They thought they could be right with God based upon how they lived. They thought that the path for their entrance (or election) into heaven would be dependent upon what they had done. (It's almost as if Paul's writing this for us.)

And (he says) they were zealous for their faith. They were (on fire) with their faith. But they were fired up (he says) by a fuel (and a promise) that would never get them to where they needed to go. It was a (false hope), a false promise. They didn't know.

Now, jump to verse 8. What's the answer...for them (back then) and for us today? (Paul points to scripture.) He says, "But what does it say? 'The word is near you: it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth that "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'"

Did you hear it? (It's not that hard.) God's election for salvation, how we get to heaven, how to know that we're right with God, certain that we belong to him, based upon his knowledge (and foreknowledge) of what's to come? There's nothing exclusionary (at all) about how this all works. There's nothing selective or "elective" (by God) that is not open to everyone.

"If you confess with your mouth that 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That's how God's election works. That's how God's selecting (for eternity) takes place. It's as close to you and to your life as your lips and your heart.

Say it and speak it. Believe it and trust it. That's all there is, and that's all it takes. It's not what you do (that gets you) into the kingdom. It's what God has done for you (in Jesus) that makes your "election" (by him) secure. (That's all there is.) Believe it. Trust it. Say it and speak it in your life...and the promise of life, the certainty of life (because of Christ) belongs to you.

This was Luther's discovery at the heart of the Reformation. It all comes back to faith. This is what got (the Reformers) all fired up and ready to go. It all comes back to a simple trust and belief in Christ.

And so, how does that all happen? How do we come to this saving and securing and selecting and "electing" faith in Christ? It's the same thing. It's not that hard.

Look at what Paul says. (He asks the question...in verse 14.) "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? (Again, he's concerned about the Jews. He's concerned about us.) 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?"

The implication (in these verses) is that they can't. It's not going to happen without someone telling them. (And then, in verse 17) "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Now, everybody look up here for a minute and don't miss what I'm about to say. This whole "faith comes by hearing" thing, and "how can they hear without a preacher"...this idea of God's election for eternity and his selection of people for the sake of Christ.

Do you know where I think (in the church) we've gone wrong? Do you know where I think (in the church) we've missed the boat? I think we've gone wrong (in the church), in our witness to the world, because we've left our witness to the world with the church as a whole. I think we've missed the boat (in the church), when it comes to leading people to Jesus, because we've failed (in our individual lives) to get out and take that step of faith.

It's not that hard. The saving work of God is not up to us. (Don't over-think it.) God is the one who saves, not you. God is one who changes people's hearts. You and I can't do that. All we can do is tell what we know. All God wants us to do is to share what we've come to believe.

How do I witness to my friends? (I let them know I'm a follower of Jesus.) What do I say to that neighbor down the street? (I tell him, when I have the chance, of the one person that matters most in my life.) What about that kid at school who's always making fun of those who say they are followers of Jesus? (Don't argue with him, but don't be afraid to be honest.) And what about at my work, when I'm the only one who names the name of Christ? What about in my family when I've been praying and acting and living in a way that I hope and I trust will make a difference to those in my life I love the most?

Don't make it too hard. Don't over-think what's already been thought about and planned by God. "Faith comes by hearing, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Paul says, "Just say it." (He says), "Just tell people what you know." Jesus died for you. God loves you. If they don't believe it, say it again. If they can't accept that it's true, tell them it is. And don't over-think it. Don't pretend like you have all the answers, because you don't, and (don't argue with them), because you don't have to.

Here's how it works. If you're here today and you're not sure that you're loved by God. (Let me tell you.) You are and you always have been and always will be. (It doesn't matter.) If you're here today and you think God could never forgive what you've done. (Let me tell you.) He already has and it's gone, nailed to the cross, with Jesus.

If you're here today and you're afraid, (let me tell you), you don't have to be because God knows your life and he cares. If you're here today and you've (heard it all before) and you still don't get it (and aren't sure), I'll tell you again. God loves you (in Christ) and he'll never stop loving you, no matter what.

How can they call on one they have not believed in, and how can they believe in one they haven't heard, and how can they hear unless someone (in their life) is willing to speak and to share and to witness to their faith in Christ?

I can't make you believe. (I can't make anyone believe.) All I can do is to tell you what I know. I can't lead you to faith, but I can point you to the one in whom I place my trust. And I can tell you it works, and I can share what he's done (in my life), and I can leave the rest to God who (in his foreknowledge) never stops calling and choosing and selecting and "electing" people he loves.

My friends, I have a long list of people in my life that I (so much want) to come to a saving faith in Christ; something like Paul and his anguish for his own people. Some are among my friends. Some are among my family. Some are even remotely and unofficially connected to this church.

I can't control what they do with Jesus. I can't and never have and never will be able to create a saving-faith in Christ. All I can do is control my own personal response to him. If he's my Lord (which he is), and if I trust my life to him (which I do), then all he asks in return is that I share what I've come to know.

God's election for eternity comes by faith...and faith comes by hearing the word of Christ. If we don't say it, they'll never hear it. If they don't hear it, then they'll never know.

Don't overthink it. It's not that hard. "If you confess with your mouth that 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Amen.