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GOD'S PURPOSE, GOD'S CHOICE

Genesis 25:1-26

By

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Genesis Lesson 49

God's Purpose, God's Choice Genesis 25:1-26

Few biblical doctrines have caused as much controversy as that of divine election, the truth that God's sovereign choice lies behind our salvation. The story is told of a church that got into a squabble over this issue. As the debate grew more heated, they separated to two sides of the auditorium. One poor man didn't know what to do, so he wandered into the predestination side. Someone asked him, "Who sent you here?" He replied, "No one, I came of my own free will." They couldn't tolerate that, so they pushed him across the aisle. Someone in the free-will camp asked him why he had come over there. He replied, "I had no choice; I was forced over here!" At this point, the poor man had no where to go!

I don't want to stir up controversy, but I must teach what the Bible says, even when it presents difficult doctrines. If you don't agree with me, I ask that you have a teachable heart and be a Berean, examining the Scriptures to see if what I say is true. I believe you will discover that at the heart of the Bible is the truth that God sovereignly works all things, including the salvation of His elect, according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). The apostle Paul cites Genesis 25:23 in his defense of this doctrine in Romans 9:10-12. So we need to think carefully about this important doctrine and how it applies to us.

Genesis 25 is the kind of passage a lot of preachers would skip. It begins by telling of other sons whom Abraham had by Keturah; it gives notice of Abraham's death and burial; it runs through a list of Ishmael's descendants; and, it describes the birth of Esau and Jacob. Although I don't own a copy to consult, this is the kind of passage the *Reader's Digest Condensed Bible* could easily compress into just a few verses. Frankly, it doesn't seem very relevant to where we all live.

When you come to a passage like this, you need to ask, What was Moses' purpose in writing it? From there we can discover how it applies to us. Moses was writing to a people about to go in and

conquer the land promised to Abraham's descendants through Isaac. The previous generation had the opportunity to conquer that land, but they died in the wilderness because of their unbelief. Now this generation had an opportunity to obey God in His redemptive plan of giving the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants. God's purpose as promised to Abraham will be fulfilled. The question is, will this generation be used of God to fulfill it, or will they, too, be set aside?

The point Moses was trying to impress on his readers was that *God's purpose according to His choice will stand*. God is sovereign; what He says, He will do. But even so, His chosen people must submit and commit themselves to His purpose if they want His blessing.

Since God's purpose according to His choice will stand,
we must submit and commit ourselves to His purpose
if we want His blessing.

1. God's purpose according to His choice will stand.

Whenever a great man, who has founded a work or a movement, dies, there is concern for who will carry on. But with God's program, there need be no such concern. His purpose is greater than any man. Although Abraham was the father of our faith, it was only because God chose Abraham, called him, and promised to make a great nation of him, to give him the land of Canaan, and to bless him and all nations through his descendants. The most certain thing in this world is that God will do what He has said. Nothing can thwart His purpose.

This section of Genesis shows that God keeps His promises. That's the point of listing Abraham's sons through Keturah. There is debate about when Abraham took her as his wife. If it was after Sarah's death, then God miraculously had to extend Abraham's physical ability to produce children after the birth of Isaac. Because of Abraham's age and the fact that Keturah is called a concubine (25:6; 1 Chron. 1:32), some prefer the view that Abraham took her while Sarah was alive. The problem with that view is that it doesn't seem consistent with Abraham's character or his commitment to Sarah. So take your pick!

But the point is, God had promised to make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations (17:4). The list of Abraham's sons

through Keturah, several of whom grew into nations, shows the fulfillment of God's promise. Even though we don't recognize most of these names, Israel did. The existence of these nations was a demonstration to Israel that what God promises, He does.

The text goes on to make the point that Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac (25:5). While he gave some gifts to Keturah's sons, he sent them away. They were not given the promises of blessing and the land which Isaac received. Isaac was God's choice, and thus He blessed him after Abraham's death (25:11). As Isaac's descendants, Moses's readers needed to see their part as God's chosen means of fulfilling His promises to Abraham, and they needed to obey God in taking the promised land.

Then Moses lists the generations of Ishmael (25:12-18). *Why? To make the same point--that God's purpose according to His choice will stand.* Abraham had asked God that Ishmael might live before Him (17:18). God denied that request because He had chosen Isaac, but He promised Abraham that Ishmael would become the father of twelve princes, and that He would make him into a great nation (17:20). Also, the Lord had promised Hagar that her son would live in defiance of (or "over against") all his brothers (16:12). Moses records the fulfillment of that in 25:18. The point is, God's purpose according to His sovereign choice was accomplished.

Moses hammers home the same point in the account of the birth of Esau and Jacob. If God was going to make a great nation of Abraham through Isaac, then obviously Isaac needed to have children. But Rebekah, like Sarah, was barren. For 20 years there were no children in their marriage. But Isaac prayed and the Lord answered in accordance with His promise to Abraham.

But even in that situation, God made a choice. He told Rebekah that two nations would come from the twin sons in her womb, and that the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob). Esau became the father of the Edomites. Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, became the father of that nation. It was God's purpose that Israel's descendants, those to whom Moses was writing, fulfill God's purpose according to His choice of Jacob, by conquering the promised land.

So everything in the text is there to make the same point--that God chooses certain people for His purpose and that His purpose according to His choice will be accomplished. All is according to the word of the God who chose Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob to inherit the land of Canaan. These verses reveal two striking things about God's choice:

A. God's choice usually runs counter to man's wisdom.

If we were going to pick a man to be the father of a multitude of nations, we'd probably run the couple through a fertility test and then pick the one who looked the most promising. God picked a couple who couldn't produce any children. Then, we'd make sure that his son and his wife were fertile. In God's sovereignty, the son's wife was barren. His half-brother, Ishmael, didn't seem to have any problem producing twelve sons, but Isaac could produce only two, and that only after 20 years of pleading with God. If we had to pick between the two sons, we'd pick the oldest. He seemed to be the strongest. The youngest was a wimp and a deceiver! God picked him. That's how God's choice usually runs--counter to man's wisdom. As the apostle Paul explained (1 Cor. 1:26-30):

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God.

If God chose those who were strong in themselves, they would boast in themselves and God would be robbed of His glory. If God chose those who first chose Him, they could brag about their intelligent choice. So God chooses those whom the world would never choose, those who cannot choose Him. When His purpose is fulfilled through them, He gets the glory.

B. God's choice operates on the principle of grace, not merit.

One of the most difficult, but most rewarding, truths in the Bible to grasp is that God doesn't operate on the merit system. He doesn't choose those who have earned it or who show the most

potential. He doesn't choose on the basis of birth order or strength. If He did, He would have picked Ishmael over Isaac. Ishmael was tough; he grew up by surviving in a hostile desert. Isaac was a mild, blah sort of guy, not noted for much except digging a few wells. God would have picked Esau over Jacob. Esau was a man's man, an outdoorsman. Jacob was a conniving mama's boy.

And, contrary to popular opinion, God doesn't choose those whom He knows in advance will choose Him. Many say that God, in His foreknowledge, looks down through history, sees who will decide for Him, and puts them on His list. But that makes the sovereign God dependent on the choices of fickle man. It assumes, contrary to Scripture, that fallen man has the ability to choose God. And it flatly contradicts what Paul states in Romans 9:11, that God determined that Esau would serve Jacob while they were still in the womb, before they did anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand. God didn't work out His eternal plan after previewing how things would turn out. God sovereignly chose whom He chose according to grace, which is His unmerited favor.

This bothers people, because it humbles our pride and strips us of all glory, but it's one of the most rewarding concepts in the Bible to lay hold of. It means that your salvation does not depend on you and your feeble hold on God, but on God and His firm grip on you. It means that you don't have to perform or measure up to be accepted by God. It casts you totally on God and His sovereign grace, which is a good place to be. It floods you with gratitude as you consider His mercy in choosing you in spite of your sin.

You say, "If God has done it all, does that mean that I can kick back and do nothing?" No! While the Bible plainly teaches that God's purpose according to His choice will stand, it also teaches that I must submit myself and commit myself to what He is doing in the world. I can either cooperate with His sovereign plan and be blessed. Or I can resist His purpose and He will set me aside and raise up others to fulfill it. While God is sovereign, He has given me the responsibility to obey Him. I can't presume on being one of the elect and go on living for myself. Thus,

2. We must submit and commit ourselves to God's purpose according to His choice.

A. We must submit ourselves to God's purpose according to His choice.

I used to struggle with the doctrine of election. I would go into a tailspin thinking, "If God sovereignly chooses some to salvation, then He's not being fair! If He ordains everything, then He's responsible for evil." I especially had problems with Romans 9, where Paul quotes Genesis 25:23. I thought, "It just isn't fair of God!"

Of course that's the very objection Paul anticipates. He asks, "There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!" Then he shows how God has mercy on whom He wills and hardens whom He wills. Then he anticipates our next objection: "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'" Don't miss the thrust of his answer: "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (see Rom. 9:14-20).

What he's saying is, "You don't have the right to ask the question, so shut up!" There are some questions which we dare not pose to the Sovereign of the universe. The very question presumes that I have a right to sit in judgment on God, rather than bowing in fear before His sovereignty.

So the proper response is simply to submit to God and seek to obey what His Word clearly reveals, namely, that God's sovereign purpose according to His unconditional choice will stand; and, at the same time, I am responsible to submit and obey. When I quit fighting and submitted to God in that way, the truth of divine election became very precious to me.

B. We must commit ourselves to God's purpose according to His choice.

Submission means yielding in my struggle against God's right to choose whom He wills to accomplish His purpose. But beyond that, I need to commit myself to God's purpose according to His choice. God wants to use me in accomplishing His eternal purpose. On the surface that sounds glorious and easy. But it's never easy in the actual process. So God's people must commit themselves to

the hardship and endurance necessary to bring His purpose into reality.

We've already seen the struggles of faith which Abraham had to endure. He had to wait years for God to give him Isaac. During that time, there were other tests of faith, such as his mistake in fathering Ishmael through Hagar, and the offering up of Isaac. Our text passes over what must have been a difficult trial of faith for Abraham: His son Isaac and his wife were unable to have children for 20 years. How could God make a great nation out of Abraham through Isaac when Isaac couldn't have any children? Meanwhile, Ishmael was having sons like crazy! Finally, 15 years before Abraham's death, Esau and Jacob were born.

There is a prominent false teaching in our day, that if you're a faithful Christian, you'll be spared from all suffering. If you're sick, you can claim instant healing by faith. If you need money, ask God for it; it's your divine right. Whatever trial you're in, you can get out of instantly if you'll just claim deliverance by faith. Those who teach such nonsense should read their Bibles!

The Lord didn't wave His wand over the land of Canaan so that Israel could move in without any struggle. They had to commit themselves to God's purpose to give them that land and they had to fight to get it. And we must commit ourselves to God's purpose to call out a people for Himself from every tongue and tribe and nation. God's missionary purpose requires our commitment of time, effort, and money. He will accomplish His purpose for the nations, but we must commit ourselves to see that purpose fulfilled. What happens when we submit and commit ourselves to God's purpose according to His choice?

3. When we submit and commit ourselves to God's purpose according to His choice, He blesses us.

Abraham is the example in our text. He submitted and committed himself to God's purpose, and God blessed him abundantly. We read that he died "satisfied with life" (25:8). The expression is literally "full of years," but it means more than just old. It implies that he couldn't ask for anything more from life than God had given him. The only way you can truly die that way is if you have lived to further God's purpose. If you live for yourself, Jesus says

you'll come up empty, but if you live for Christ and the gospel's sake, you'll find true life (Mark 8:35). As Jim Elliot, who was killed at age 28 trying to take the gospel to the Auca Indians, said, "He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Not only did Abraham die satisfied with life. We also read that "he was gathered to his people" (25:8). That phrase is more than a euphemism for death or burial, which the text explicitly states in addition to saying that he was gathered to his people. It is an early reference to the hope of life beyond the grave. If there is no eternity, then eat, drink, and be merry now. But if God's Word is true (and He has a pretty good record so far, with hundreds of fulfilled prophecies and more about to be filled), then we need to live in light of His purpose as revealed in His Word. We can know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

Conclusion

Someone asked a Little Leaguer how his team was doing. The boy replied that his team was doing well, but that they were behind 17-0. The man asked if he was discouraged at being so far behind. The boy replied, "Oh no, sir, we haven't even been up to bat yet!"

Sometimes it's easy to look at all the evil in the world and get discouraged because it seems like God's side is losing badly. But the Book of Revelation shows that it's going to look like that until the bottom of the ninth. Then, in one hour, the tide will turn and God will triumph mightily. Someone asked an old Christian gentleman what the secret of his triumphant outlook was. He replied, "I've read the last book of the Bible, so I know how the story ends. I'm on the winning side!"

The great doctrine that God will accomplish His sovereign purpose according to His choice should encourage us to submit ourselves to God and give ourselves fully to His purpose of taking the gospel to every people. When we do that we will be truly blessed by Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the doctrine of election comfort or disturb you? Why?
2. How do we maintain a proper balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility? How can we check ourselves?
3. Some argue that the doctrine of election discourages evangelism. Why is it just the reverse?
4. What are some of the practical benefits of the doctrine of election?
5. Is it being intellectually dishonest to accept Paul's answer in Rom. 9:19-24? Why/why not?

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