



When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

“Don’t Call Me Ishmael”

Romans 9:6-13

There’s a lot of crazy stuff about birth order. For example, I came across this tidbit about last born children:

[The last born] of the family are social and outgoing, they are the most financially irresponsible of all birth orders. They just want to have a good time. Knowing that these kids love the limelight, it’s no surprise to discover that Billy Crystal, Goldie Hawn, Drew Carey, Jim Carey and Steve Martin are all last-borns.

If you were a first century Jew in Rome, birth order was important because it determined birthright. The birthright of the firstborn Jewish son consisted, first of all, in a double portion of any inheritance. The firstborn also became the new head of the family, thus having considerable authority over the other members of the family.

Let’s say you were a first century Jew who had been born-again. And let’s say you were a gracious individual who understood that Gentiles could be saved without conforming to Jewish rites and rituals.

Still you would look out at what was happening spiritually and be confused. Israel was God’s “firstborn,” but they no longer had the birthright. God seemed to have set aside Israel as His firstborn nation in favor of the Gentiles.

True, the leaders of the nation of Israel had officially rejected Jesus. They had crucified Him. But God had made certain unconditional promises to Israel through the patriarchs. Had God’s Word to Israel failed?

Romans 9:6 But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel,

“Taken no effect” means *failed*. The Word of God had not failed. Paul will show from the Old Testament patriarchs that “they are not all Israel who are of Israel.” God never intended natural birth alone to determine salvation. Natural birth determined privilege but not salvation. A natural born Jew was privileged to have the things listed in verses four and five, but these alone were insufficient to save him. A supernatural birth was also required.

Natural birth and supernatural birth are illustrated to the Jews in the offspring of the patriarch Abraham.

Romans 9:7 nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "IN ISAAC YOUR SEED SHALL BE CALLED."

Abraham had two sons:

- Ishmael was born when Abraham went into to Sarah's maid, Hagar, and slept with her.
- Isaac was born when Sarah was past child bearing age and barren.

Both sons were naturally born to Abraham, but only one was also understood to be supernaturally born.

Paul applied this truth in verses eight and nine:

Romans 9:8 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.

Romans 9:9 For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON."

Paul was comparing Christ-rejecting Jews to Ishmael. *That's rough!* But it was accurate. They were only born “of the flesh,” only born naturally. They lacked the supernatural birth necessary to be saved.

Jews and Gentiles who receive Jesus Christ are like Isaac. They are supernaturally born and saved.

It's as if he was saying to the first century Jews, "at this time the Lord has come and He will have sons - all those who are supernaturally born-again, Jew and Gentile alike."

Even though Israel was set apart, from the beginning God taught the Jews that a second, a supernatural, birth was needed for them to be saved.

Paul next looked at the patriarch Isaac and his wife Rebecca and their twin boys, Esau and Jacob. He goes from discussing *birth* to discussing *birthright*.

Romans 9:10 And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac

Romans 9:11 (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),

Romans 9:12 it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger."

Romans 9:13 As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

Esau was Isaac and Rebecca's firstborn son and, by privilege, should have inherited the birthright. Instead Jacob received the birthright. The second born son ended up with the privileges that belonged to the firstborn.

Now, before you get lost in the secondary theological ramifications of these verses, don't overlook Paul's primary argument. Esau and Jacob and their birthright are used here to illustrate an important point:

- Esau had the privileges of birth, but he later despised them.
- Jacob did not have the privileges of birth, but he later desired them.

Esau represents the nation of Israel, and Jacob represents the Gentiles.

- The nation of Israel had the privileges by birth but later despised them by rejecting Jesus.
- The Gentiles never had the privileges by birth but later desired them and were being saved by the preaching of the Gospel.

The Jews had become like Esau! Wow. First Ishmael and now Esau.

God was giving His attention to those second-born, the Gentiles, who were being born-again by faith in Jesus.

By looking at birth and birthright, Paul established precedents in the Jewish Scriptures for God setting aside nonbelieving Jews in order to save Gentiles.

What I've just told you is the context of these verses. It is why Paul wrote them. He did not write them to develop or to defend a theology about individual salvation that would teach God predestines anyone to Heaven while simultaneously predestining others to Hell.

What are we therefore to make of verses eleven and thirteen?

Verse eleven reads, "(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)."

We say that their *earthly election* is in view, not their *eternal election*. In other words, God had already *elected* or *chosen* the earthly paths of these two boys in Rebecca's womb.

I'd like to quote Dr. Harry (H.A.) Ironside:

What a tremendous amount of needless controversy has raged about these verses! Yet how plain and simple they are, viewed in the light of God's [dealings with Israel as a nation]. There is no question here of predestination to heaven or reprobation to hell... we are not told here, nor anywhere else, that before children are born it is God's purpose to send one to heaven and another to hell... **The passage has entirely to do with privilege here on earth.** It was the purpose of God that Jacob should be the father of the nation of Israel, and that through him... our Lord Jesus Christ... should come into the world. He had also predetermined that Esau should be a man of the wilderness - the father of a nation of nomads, as the Edomites have ever been.

This, I believe, is the most accurate way of understanding this verse.

But doesn't verse thirteen clearly say, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have **hated**"?

It certainly does - but you need to go back to *where* and *why* it says that! It is not a quote from the first book of the Bible. It is a quote from the last book of the Old Testament, from Malachi.

It was not said before the children were born and it was not said of Esau as a person but of his descendants, the Edomites, as a nation. Hundreds of years after Jacob and Esau had died the Israelites and Edomites became bitter enemies. The Edomites often aided Israel's enemies in attacks on Israel. God's statement in Malachi refers to the Edomites as a nation.

Let's deal biblically with this word "hated." Dr. Herbert Wolf has this insightful commentary:

The meaning of God's hatred has perplexed and confused many, but a solution is readily available from Scripture. In Genesis 29:30-33 a close parallel is found in the status of Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah. Verse thirty states that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, while verses thirty-one and thirty-three describe Leah as "hated." She was "hated" in the sense that she came out second best in her rivalry with Rachel, so the NASB is correct in translating the word "unloved" rather than "hated."

In the New Testament the same modified use of "hate" occurs in the passage about hating one's own parents or family in order to follow Christ (Luke 14:26). This is explained in Matthew 10:37 as a matter of loving God *more than* parents or family. Only in that sense can it be called "hatred."

While some will rant on-and-on about "hated" means "hated," it means "hated" in this modified, earthly sense that we see by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

It is my position that these verses are here to illustrate God's integrity in His current dealings with the nation of Israel with regard to His unconditional promises to them. This is not Paul's theology on individual salvation.

God is not unfaithful or breaking His Word to the Jews. He has set them aside to call out to Himself a people from all ethnic groups - Jews and Gentiles alike.

Even as we say that God has “set them aside,” it’s clear He is still dealing with Israel as a nation. Not just because we see Israel returned to her ancient homeland as predicted in the Bible. No, it’s clear because of any number of prophecies.

For example, Daniel, in chapter nine of his book, receives the prophecy of the Seventy Weeks. The angel Gabriel explains to Daniel that seventy weeks are required to fulfill the petition Daniel has made concerning the restoration of Israel. The seventy weeks are to be interpreted as seventy weeks of years. This resulting period of 490 years (70 x7) is divided according to the text as periods of seven weeks (49 years), sixty-two weeks (434 years), and one week (7 years). The first two periods, adding up to 483 years, were consecutive and have been fulfilled in human history.

Jesus came to offer Israel the Kingdom of Heaven on earth just as scheduled at the end of the 483 years. But He was rejected by the Jewish leadership. That left the seventieth week of seven years unfulfilled. There is a prophetic postponement, a gap, of undisclosed time between the 69th and 70th week of Daniel’s prophecy.

We are living during that gap. The Gospel is going out to the whole world. When this time period, called the church age or the times of the Gentiles, is completed, the church will be resurrected and raptured to Heaven. Then God will turn His attention back to national Israel for the final 70th week. We know it better as the Great Tribulation. As it ends, all ethnic Jews on the earth are saved. The Lord returns and sets up the Kingdom which Jews once rejected but now receive.

Are you an Ishmael or an Isaac? That is, have you been born a second time, born-again?

Are you an Esau or a Jacob? That is, are you walking in the flesh or enjoying the things of the spirit?

