

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 26, 2012**

**SOVEREIGN IN SALVATION  
(Part 2)**

**Romans 9:6-33**

Today I want to talk more about God's sovereignty in salvation, also known as the doctrine of election, which is Paul's primary subject in Romans 9-11.

But first, I want to tell you a bit about our friend Jim Carr, who was shot and killed by an intruder in the Carrs' home in Greenville, NC last Sunday night. Jim and his wife Vickie were dear friends to Mary Sue and me, going back more than 30 years to 1980, when Jim and I started seminary together at Princeton Seminary. I don't remember the first time I met Jim, but we quickly became buddies. We all lived in the same married student apartment complex a few miles from the seminary campus, and Jim and Vickie were beloved friends of ours during our seminary years and beyond.

A not-yet-identified person broke into the Carrs' home around midnight last Sunday. When Jim and Vickie heard the noise, Jim went out from their bedroom to the kitchen/family room area and was immediately confronted by the intruder. Turning to close the bedroom door, in order to protect his wife, Jim took a bullet in his left shoulder that lodged in his lung, causing the lung to fill up with blood. The intruder fled the house. Jim was taken by ambulance to the hospital, where he died during surgery a few hours later.

After we graduated from Princeton in 1983, Jim pastored Presbyterian churches in Williamston and Garner, NC. He served as the organizing pastor of an EPC church plant in Garner and, in the last few years, he was involved in outreach ministries in the Greenville area. Jim never pastored a big church. He didn't achieve fame by building a mega-church or writing a lot of books. But, do you know, hundreds and hundreds of people came to the life celebration in Greenville on Thursday evening to pay their respects to Jim, to express their love and sympathy to Vickie and their family, and to express their appreciation for Jim and the impact he had in the lives of so many. Mary Sue and I are so thankful we could be there, along with another couple from Pennsylvania who have been special friends since our seminary days.

Hundreds came out Thursday evening in Greenville. And hundreds more were expected at the funeral service for Jim yesterday in Charlotte, at the church where Jim's faith in the Lord Jesus Christ first took root and was nurtured after several years of running away from God.

Though Jim Carr never pastored a large church, there is no doubt that he touched the lives of hundreds, probably thousands, of people over the years. Vickie told us that Jim had over 700 contacts in his cell phone! You know what else Vickie said? She sometimes refers to Jim as "that man." When we got the chance to speak with her personally on Thursday evening, she looked me in the eye and said: "That man prayed for you every day." That just blew me away! He was praying for me *every day*. I wish I were so faithful as a friend.

In His providence, the Lord gave us the opportunity, along with our friends from Pennsylvania, to spend some special time with Vickie on Friday before we headed home. We didn't know if or how it would work out when we made the decision to go, but God orchestrated the whole thing, and allowed us to show our love to Vickie and the family.

I can tell you this about my friend Jim Carr: Anybody who knew him knows that he knew and loved God personally. Anybody who knew him knows he had a passionate love for Jesus, a passion for the gospel, and a big, loving heart for people from all walks of life, including the down-and-outers who often get left out or left behind.

I don't know why God allowed an intruder to take Jim's life at the age of 60. We will never fully know why. I do know this: while Jim's death came as a shock to us, it wasn't a surprise to God. Jim would have agreed – and no doubt *does* agree – with David's declaration to the Lord in Psalm 139:16 that “all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.”

God's plans and purposes are often hidden from us. I've found that it is often easier to discern God's will and purposes in the rear-view mirror, when you look back on particular events or seasons in life. It is often more difficult to see what God is doing and why, when you are going through it. But, as the Scripture says, we live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). And so, if we are wise, we learn to trust in God – and to trust God – more and more in the midst of everything life throws at us. For we know that God is sovereign. We know that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). We know that nothing in life or death will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:38-39). We know that the God who made us, who created our inmost being, who knit us together in our mothers' wombs (Psalm 139:13-14), is merciful and gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love toward us (Psalm 145:8). We know that “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

My friend's death is another reminder that life in this world is fragile. James 4:14 says that our lives are like “a mist that appears for a while and then vanishes.” And it can come to an end in a flash. Life in this world can change dramatically in an instant. It can end in an instant. For anybody.

Unless the Lord Jesus returns first, the Bible says we will all have an appointment with death (Hebrews 9:27). It may come, as it did for Jim, when you least expect it. So, the key is to make sure you're ready for death whenever it comes. My friend Jim was ready. I know he was ready. I know he was ready because Jim had a living and personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of his life. Having been saved by grace, Jim had peace with God and the assurance of eternal life in the kingdom of God. Jim loved the Lord Jesus. And now he is in the presence of Jesus for eternity.

If Jim were here with us, I think he would want to know if we are ready to die. He would want to know if *you* are ready. There is only one way to be ready, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners, who gave His life for us, to reconcile us

and all who trust in Him to God the Father. So, my friends, if you have not yet received the gift of salvation found in Jesus Christ and nowhere else, I urge you to turn to Him in faith today and be reconciled to God. I don't know when, but someday it will be too late.

Now, let's turn to Romans 9 once again, where Paul lays out for us the doctrine of God's sovereignty in salvation. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word found in Romans 9:6-33.

### **GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN SALVATION**

Last Sunday I made the observation, which is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer, that the doctrine of election or predestination is controversial. It is a doctrine constantly disputed by both professional and amateur theologians alike. Entire denominations and seminaries and ministries are identified and categorized by their views on this doctrine, by whether they emphasize God's sovereignty in salvation or human responsibility, predestination or free will. In looking at Romans 9 last Sunday, we saw examples of God's sovereignty in His choice of Isaac instead of Ishmael, and His election of Jacob instead of Esau "before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad" (Romans 9:11). God chose Jacob instead of Esau not because of Jacob's character or his piety. Not because Jacob was more deserving. Neither of them deserved God's kindness. God chose Jacob, and his father Isaac before him, because it pleased Him to do so. Because it was part of His plan for the salvation of the world. It was an expression of His grace.

I have a few more observations I want to share with you today about God's sovereignty in salvation as we see it in the outworking of the doctrine of election. I want you to know that much of what I share with you comes from the wisdom of others to whom I am indebted and through whom the Holy Spirit has spoken – wise and godly men like F. F. Bruce, John Stott, Chuck Swindoll, and Dr. Graham Smith, by whose preaching some of you were fed spiritually for many years.

#### **1. ELECTION IS BASED ON GRACE, NOT RACE.**

Salvation is based entirely on grace – God's sovereign grace, not on your race. You may be able to trace your ancestry all the way back to the apostles of the New Testament. You may be related to Billy or Ruth Graham, to Jonathan or Sarah Edwards, to Martin Luther King, Jr. or Coretta Scott King. You may have six generations of missionaries or pastors in your family tree. Whatever the case, your ancestry doesn't guarantee your ascendancy to heaven. Your heredity doesn't guarantee your eternal destiny. You cannot get into heaven on the coattails of your parents or grandparents, your brother, your sister, your spouse or children. You will not get into heaven because your wife or husband is a Christian. You will not get into heaven just because you live in America, or because you were born here. Nor does being born to Jewish parents guarantee that you will go to heaven – this, despite God's sovereign choice of Israel as His special people, and all the spiritual advantages that were theirs.

Having a Christian mother or a Christian father, or both, doesn't make you or anyone else a Christian. It is not by race, but only by grace and grace alone, appropriated through faith in

Jesus Christ, that we can receive the gift of salvation. It is all by grace, which is given free of charge to people who don't deserve it, and never will. Like each one of us. That is what makes it so amazing.

## **2. GOD'S PROVISION, NOT OUR PERFORMANCE.**

Election to salvation is not based on our performance. None of us will ever be saved on the basis of anything we do, anything we have done, or anything we have the ability to do. It is not going to happen. The performance-driven life will take you to a dead end. Why did God choose Jacob? As Paul says in verse 12, it is "not by works." Not by performance. That is pretty clear, isn't it?

If we could make it to heaven on the basis of our performance, everybody in heaven would be bragging about how they got there. That doesn't really sound like heaven to me. But all grounds for boasting are gone, as Paul has already said in Romans 3:27-28 – a point he also makes in Ephesians 2:8-9, where he says that salvation is a "gift of God" received by grace through faith – "not by works, so that no one may boast."

Salvation does not hinge on our performance. Instead, it is based on God's sovereign and gracious provision.

## **3. GOD'S MERCY, NOT OUR MERIT.**

Election to salvation is all about God's mercy, not our merit. Mercy is not an entitlement. Nor is grace. God doesn't owe it to anyone. As Paul reminds us in verses 15-16, God reserves the right to show mercy whenever and wherever He chooses, to whomever He chooses. And He reserves the right to withhold it from whomever He chooses. It is completely up to Him. And we have no grounds on which to accuse God of being unjust or unfair, since nobody deserves to be saved. Nobody merits the mercy of God. Nobody. Our salvation is due to His sovereign mercy. The fact that anyone anywhere experiences salvation is attributable completely to the mercy and grace of God.

In Titus 3:3, Paul gives us this picture of life cut off from God's mercy and grace: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another."

Not a very pretty picture. But that is how it was, to one degree or another, before Christ came into our lives. And that is how it is, whether they realize it or not, for people all around us who don't know Christ in His saving power.

But this is not the end of the story for us. Paul continues in verses 4-5: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us." How? On what basis? "Not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy."

Election to salvation is an expression of God's mercy.

#### **4. JACOB I LOVED, ESAU I HATED.**

There is one more point in this passage we cannot gloss over. In verse 13, Paul quotes from the Old Testament Book of Malachi, which says: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Malachi 1:2-3). That’s pretty strong stuff, isn’t it? Did God literally hate Esau?

We know that hatred is not inherently antithetical to the holiness of God. There is such a thing as “holy hatred.” The Bible tells us there are some things that God hates. For example, consider Proverbs 6:16-19:

There are six things the LORD hates,  
seven that are detestable to Him:  
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,  
hands that shed innocent blood,  
a heart that devises wicked schemes,  
feet that rush into evil,  
a false witness who pours out lies,  
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

That gives you a pretty good idea of the kind of things God hates. The Bible also says that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), though He does make provision for it. And God hates worship that isn’t true worship. He hates worship that is just a show to make us look good (Amos 5:21; Isaiah 1:14). He hates hypocrisy. And self-righteousness.

Sometimes hatred is called for. If it is directed at the right object for the right reason in the right way, hatred can be holy. But we must be very, very careful about claiming that *our* hate is holy.

The question with regard to Romans 9:13 is: Did God literally hate Esau in the sense of despising him or wishing his destruction?

Here is John Stott’s wise interpretation: “This bald statement (*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*) sounds shocking in Christian ears and cannot possibly be taken literally. Although there is such an emotion as *holy hatred*, it is directed only to evildoers and would be inappropriate here... Some suggest that the reference is less to the individuals Jacob and Esau than to the peoples they fathered, the Israelites and the Edomites, and to their historical destinies. Others interpret the sentence as meaning, *I chose Jacob and rejected Esau*. But the third option seems best, which is to understand the antithesis as a Hebrew idiom for preference. Jesus Himself gives us this interpretative clue, since according to Luke He told us that we cannot be His disciples unless we hate our family (Luke 14:26), whereas according to Matthew we are forbidden... to love them more than [we love] Him (Matthew 10:37).”

Did Jesus mean we must hate our parents, or even our spouse or children, in order to be a true Christian? No! Jesus certainly advocated family relationships characterized by love and honor. The point Jesus was making is that if you want to be His disciple, He has to be number one in your life. You’ve got to love Him more than parents or husband or wife or

children or anyone and anything else. Your love for Him must be so preeminent that all other loves, by comparison, look like hate. Used this way, *to hate* simply means *to love less*.

Far from hating Esau, God blessed him and made of him a great nation. But God set His heart on Jacob not Esau, to bring Jacob to redemption, and through the descendants of Jacob to bring redemption to the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

That God chose Israel and not Edom or Egypt or some other nation,  
 That God chose Isaac and not Ishmael,  
 That God chose Jacob and not Esau,  
 That God chose Mary and not some other young woman to give birth to the Messiah –  
 In all these cases, God’s choice was an expression of His sovereign grace and freedom.

### **IS GOD UNFAIR?**

Does this mean that God is unfair or unjust? Paul himself asks the question in verse 14. Is it unfair of God to choose some and not others to receive His blessing? Is God unfair to choose some to be the objects of His grace and not others? There are some, even many, who contend that, if the doctrine of election is true, God is both unfair and unjust.

But the Bible says God is neither unjust nor unfair, because the truth is that nobody deserves to be saved. Nobody deserves God’s mercy. Nobody deserves God’s grace. So, the truly astonishing thing is not that some people are saved and some are not. What is astonishing is that anybody is saved at all. Because what we all deserve is God’s righteous, holy wrath.

### **BOTH-AND, NOT EITHER-OR**

Ultimately, the relationship between God’s sovereignty in salvation and our human responsibility remains a mystery. Though I can’t explain it, I’m inclined to think it is really a both-and, not an either-or. Dutch theologian R. B. Kuiper has described it this way: “I liken them to two ropes going through two holes in the ceiling and over a pulley above. If I wish to support myself by them, I must cling to them both. If I cling only to one and not the other, I go down. I read the many teachings of the Bible regarding God’s election, predestination, His chosen people, and so on. I also read the many teachings regarding ‘whosoever will may come’ and urging people to exercise their responsibility as human beings.” Admitting the inability of his “puny human mind” to understand how they fit together, Kuiper said: “With childlike faith, I cling to both ropes, fully confident that in eternity I will see that both strands of truth are, after all, of one piece.”

I’m holding on to both ropes, too.

The debate between those who champion the sovereignty of God and those who give preeminence to human free will is not likely to cease until Jesus comes back. The danger is that one can fall into the ditch of unbiblical belief and practice by going too far in either direction. Someone asked Charles H. Spurgeon how to reconcile these seemingly

contradictory doctrines of God's sovereignty and the free will of humanity. Spurgeon replied: "I wouldn't try. I never reconcile friends."

Friends, you see, don't need to be reconciled. They complement one another and work together even if it is not plain to us exactly how.

Is God sovereign? Yes He is. Do we have free will as men and women created in God's image? Yes we do. I'll talk more about that another time. God's sovereignty in salvation is an expression of His mercy and grace, without which no one can be saved. But each of us is responsible for the response we make to embrace or reject the gospel. Do not, I pray, reject the grace held out to you by the Lord Jesus Christ. Be reconciled to God today through faith in Jesus and His death on the cross for you. And take comfort in the doctrine of His sovereign grace. Which is nothing less than amazing.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.