International Bible Lessons Commentary
Romans 9:6-18
New Revised Standard Version

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, August 14, 2016

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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, August 14, 2016**, is from **Romans 9:6-18**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary* below. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help you with class preparation and conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Lessons Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss the Bible and each week's commentary and lesson at the *International Bible Lesson Forum*.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Romans 9:6-18

Opening Commentary Note on Romans 9

From Romans 1-8 (and other books in the Bible), believers in Jesus Christ know God and God's character from the Bible and their experiences with God in Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. They know that God is holy and God is love. They know God expressed His holiness and love supremely when He sent Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners. They know God expresses His holiness and love through His justice, mercy, grace, kindness, patience, and other attributes in many ways. They know God does everything with infinite wisdom, infinite power, and reasons founded on His loving, just, and merciful character. Therefore, even though God has not revealed all of His reasons for why He has done and does many things, we know God and do not need to know all of His reasons for what He does (which would be impossible because of our finite and impure minds). Though we do not know all of God's reasons for His choices and decisions (and God does not reveal them all), we do know that God expresses His loving, just, merciful, gracious, kind, saving, and holy character through His actions in history and in individuals. Therefore, when we do not understand a teaching in the Bible, we do not accuse God of being unfair or unjust as some do; we simply admit that we do not know how and why God makes certain choices and decisions, and we maintain our love for and trust in God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We should not let what we do not understand to undermine or shatter our faith, and we can continue to prayerfully study the Bible for a better understanding. As we begin a study of Romans

9:6-18, there is much room for misunderstanding and much we simply will not easily understand, but we can keep praying for God to reveal to us what He wants us to know and how He wants us to live by faith.

(Romans 9:6) It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,

In Romans 9:1-5, Paul expressed his grief over the many people of Israel who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah as he had once done. He wrote that he would almost give anything if they would come to Jesus for salvation, but he did not mean to imply that God had not done enough to save them. In Romans 9:6, he declared the rejection of Jesus by many Jews was no indication that God's word (the gospel of Jesus Christ) had failed – the reason involved God and His purposes in leading both Jews and Gentiles to salvation, and He would lead them to salvation by grace through faith. To fulfill His promises and prophecies, God created and selected the ancestors of Jesus, including different individuals that became families, and then He created the kingdoms of Israel and Judah before Mary gave birth to the Messiah in Bethlehem of Judea. Paul knew that God led people to saving faith in the Messiah at different times and places in order to declare His glory and power and to lead many people (both Jews and Gentiles) to saving faith. Not all who are physically descended from Israel are both physically and spiritually descended from Israel. Not everyone with the DNA of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob accepted the word of God and lived by faith according to the will of God; any more than a person with Christian parents is automatically a Christian, people must be saved by God's grace through belief in Jesus Christ.

(Romans 9:7) and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you."

Not all of Abraham's children lived by faith as he did, and not all of Abraham's descendants would live by faith in the true God as he did. Not all of Abraham's descendants were also his descendants spiritually. Furthermore, the Messiah would come from only one of Abraham's sons that God would personally select, and Isaac would be miraculously conceived and born when Abraham and Sarah were too old and according to God's perfect timing. Then, the Messiah would come from only one of Isaac's sons, Jacob (whom God renamed "Israel"), and not from Esau or any of Isaac's other children. As Creator, Lord, and King, God did not leave the ancestors of Jesus to chance, God personally decided the direct line of Jesus' ancestors from Abraham to Jesus the Messiah. With loving grace and saving purpose, God selected the specific ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, which shows that God is the loving and gracious Lord over history and every nation. Paul did not teach that Abraham's or Isaac's other children were unsaved or were not saved by faith in the true God at some other point in time. To show His power, glory, and sovereign rule over all

history, time, and people, generations later the Messiah would be a descendent of Abraham through Isaac.

(Romans 9:8) This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

God does not save someone because of their race, the color of their skin, their nationality, their other physical traits, or because of their achievements. Believers are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, a physical descendant of Abraham, and the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and Isaac. Because of the virgin birth of Jesus through Mary, only Jesus in some sense is a child of God the Father by physical descent (if we carefully use that language). Paul argued that the Jews are not children of God by physical descent. Other than Jesus, the children of God are children of God because God has fulfilled His promises through Jesus and God has chosen them and adopted them into His family (see Romans 8:15, Romans 8:23, Romans 9:4, Galatians 4:5, Ephesians 1:5). The children of the promise are those who believe in and trust Jesus Christ for salvation as God promised; and in the Old Testament, the children of the promise are those who looked forward to and believed in the coming of God's promised Messiah – all those who live by faith in the promised Messiah are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

(Romans 9:9) For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son."

As a good example to all believers and teachers, Paul continued to go back to the Bible to illustrate and prove why he taught as he did. The Bible revealed that God had created and selected Abraham and Sarah to be the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, and God had appointed the time when Isaac would be conceived and Sarah would be his mother through a miraculous birth because of her old age (which would have naturally been after nine months). Therefore, Paul reasoned, God would choose the time when someone would be saved, and the fact that many Jews did not believe (or not yet believe) in the Messiah was in some way related to God's perfect timing. The Bible also shows how God cared for Ishmael after he had to be sent away by Abraham at Sarah's request. Having been raised in Abraham's household, Ishmael may have learned about and believed in God's promise to Abraham and at some time come to saving faith in the true God – the Bible does not tell us. The Bible does tell us that Isaac was to be an ancestor of Jesus the Messiah, and God personally chose Isaac to be Jesus' ancestor.

(Romans 9:10) Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac.

Some might have thought that Ishmael was rejected simply because Sarah was not his mother, and not because God chose Isaac by grace as the child of His promise and an ancestor of Jesus the Messiah. Should someone think that one illustration was insufficient to reveal the power and wisdom of God, and how God selected the people of His choice to work out His plans with His timing, without regard to their qualifications by their later works, as though they earned their places of honor as God's servants because of what God foreknew they would do by their own choices and personal accomplishments, Paul referred to the children of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, who as twins were conceived at the same time with the same mother, by Rebecca.

(Romans 9:11) Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue,

[Keep in mind the Opening Commentary Note on Romans 9. Paul has written this chapter on election (or God's selection) as an experienced apostle and mature Christian who is amazed at the miracle that Jesus Christ saved him and called him to be an apostle instead of leaving him as a persecutor of Jesus Christ and His church. As a mature Christian, Paul knew that he was saved by grace alone and not because of anything he had done in the past, but in spite of all of his sins, and not because of anything he would do in and of himself in the future as an apostle. In looking back, mature Christians know that they are saved

by grace and a miracle of God and for no other reasons than God's reasons and God's timing, which are mysterious and unknown to them. They know that they have faith in Jesus Christ, and they know that too is a miracle, and they know they want to maintain their faith and hope throughout their lives on earth. They know they love God, Jesus, and the Scriptures. They know they want to serve God in Christ and use in the best ways the abilities and talents God has given them with the guidance and power that the Holy Spirit gives them day-by-day. They are amazed and humbled when they think of themselves as Christians rather than as lost slaves to sin. Believers need to read Romans, chapters 9-11, with a measure of that understanding and humble thankfulness to God for His grace and mercy.]

As the Holy Spirit led Paul in writing Romans 9:11 and the following verses, Paul began to deduct from God's providential work in human history (when God decided who would be Jesus' ancestors and how God would demonstrate His truth, glory, and power) that God also has good, loving, and wise reasons (though presently unknown) when He decides when and who He will predestine, call, justify, and glorify. Using Old Testament examples, Paul illustrated what he had taught in Romans 1-8: Believers in Jesus Christ are saved by God's grace through faith and not because of their race or their works (past, present, or future works done by themselves) or for anything within themselves. Similar to Jacob and Esau,

people are not chosen and saved because of what they have done or will do (good or bad) in and of themselves apart from God. People are saved because of and for God's good and wise purposes, many of which are unknown to everyone but God. Because of God's gracious choice, and not because they have in any way earned or deserved salvation or are better than someone else because of their race or because of what they have done or will do apart from God, God saves and adopts believers into His family.

(Romans 9:12) not by works but by his call) she was told, "The elder shall serve the younger."

Paul showed from the Scriptures that believers are not saved by their works but by God and God's choice and calling. He wanted to emphasize that people are saved by grace and God should receive all the glory whenever anyone comes to faith in Jesus Christ. God's choice of the younger son showed that with respect to salvation birth order is not important to God, nor is birth order important to God regarding the qualifications for leadership in His Kingdom; for example, Israel's greatest king, King David, was not a firstborn son. In the Old Testament, if God always chose the eldest son for any and all leadership positions, then firstborn sons could become arrogant and every younger child throughout history would be adversely affected. God does not call and save people in relation to their birth order, but for His own reasons.

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

The reason God gave for choosing Jacob over Esau had nothing to do with their good or bad behavior or even their later choices (see Romans 9:11). Some have argued that God hated Esau because He foresaw Esau's future sinful and unrepentant rebellious behavior (see Hebrews 12:16), but God does not save people because of their good works or because of their sinful behavior (think of the apostle Paul), but for reasons of His own. The Bible does not give us all the reasons for all of God's choices and preferences, and sometimes gives us no reason at all; but God expects us to trust Him because we know Him and His character and do not always need to know His reasons for everything He does. Neither Jacob nor Esau lived exemplary lives before God changed Jacob and renamed him Israel. We know Esau and his descendants were always secondary to Israel in history; we know Israel was chosen and destined to be an ancestor of Jesus: that was God's choice and He is Lord. Because the focus of the Scriptures remains primarily on Jesus Christ, we do not know if God ever or later chose to call Esau to saving faith or how many of his descendants God has called and led to saving faith and righteousness. We do know that God is loving, wise, just, merciful, and gracious, and God has good and sufficient reasons for all He does. God is not irrational. Why some are saved and others are not remains a mystery to us, because the Bible teaches that God saves people by grace

through faith and God does not desire that any should perish: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Without being unfair or unjust, God holds people personally responsible for not repenting of their sins and placing their faith in Jesus the Messiah as their Lord and Savior. Especially when some truths appear to be contradictory, and we know God does not contradict himself, we need to pray for God’s grace to help us understand and believe the Bible. We need to pray for God to help us explain His ways and truth to others when they think God is unfair or unjust, which Paul began to try to do once again in Romans 9:14.

(Romans 9:14) What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!

Paul anticipated that people would object to his teaching on God’s reason for choosing Jacob over Esau. Using our imagination and speculating, we can think of other possible reasons than the ones Paul gave that also show God is not unjust; perhaps God did not want firstborn sons to think they were better than everyone else, or perhaps God did not want people to think that God always prefers firstborn sons to all others in the family, perhaps those are reasons why He chose Jacob over Esau. These are sufficient reasons for showing God is not unjust. However, Paul avoided speculation and turned once again to the Scriptures to answer the charge that God is unjust; as Lord

over all, God has the freedom and power to choose as He sees proper and for reasons He keeps to himself. When Paul considered the fact that God chose Moses to lead His people out of Egypt, he emphasized God's mercy and compassion (see the verses below).

(Romans 9:15) For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

God is the sovereign King of the universe and He rules over all the kingdoms of the earth; these kingdoms include believers and unbelievers that God rules justly and mercifully for good reasons that may be known only to Him. Paul referred his readers to the Scriptures where God declared that He is merciful and compassionate. God shows mercy and compassion to sinners and God expects us to show mercy and compassion to others (even as Jesus, the Son of God, did when visibly upon this earth). As believers in Jesus, we can certainly pray for God to show mercy and compassion to sinners when we share the good news of Jesus Christ with others as Jesus commanded us.

(Romans 9:16) So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.

The word "It" refers to salvation. Salvation depends on God's mercy, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. God shows compassion and mercy to sinners and saves sinners by grace through faith in Jesus

Christ. God does not save sinners because they desire mercy or compassion; God saves sinners before sinners even know they need mercy, compassion, grace, and salvation. God demonstrated His love for us when Christ died for sinners while we were still sinners and before we ever repented. Paul went to great efforts to demonstrate that salvation rests on God's compassion and mercy and not on sinners pleading for God's mercy or making other human efforts.

(Romans 9:17) For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."

This verse refers to the fact that God raised up Pharaoh for a specific purpose in salvation history – the demonstration of God's power and the proclamation of God's name throughout the earth that many might come to the knowledge of God and saving faith in God. God achieved His purpose on earth through Pharaoh. The Bible does not tell us whether God ever called Pharaoh to saving faith right before he died or if Pharaoh ever repented before he died. But through Pharaoh and by God's saving work in spite of Pharaoh's hardness of heart, God showed forth good reasons to Jews and Egyptians, and to all who would hear about God freeing His people from slavery in Egypt, for believing in Him.

(Romans 9:18) So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

God chose to have compassion and mercy on Moses and the Hebrews who were enslaved in Egypt, and in doing so God demonstrated His mercy, goodness, and power. Pharaoh deserved God's judgment because of his injustice to God's people, and God demonstrated His justice, goodness, and power when He punished Pharaoh. When God hardened Pharaoh's heart, God gave Pharaoh the strength of will to do what Pharaoh wanted to do in opposing God and oppressing God's people in spite of God's plagues of punishment on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Through Pharaoh, God demonstrated that no one could separate from God those God loved and chose for His purposes. After writing about these complex truths and after trying to further explain the grace of God, Paul humbly proclaimed that he did not understand all he wanted to understand when writing about God's grace and mercy: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?' For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:33-36).

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why might it be easier for a Christian to understand Romans 9:6-18 than a non-Christian?

2. In Romans 9:6-18, who did Paul write were God's children?

3. What does Paul refer his readers to in order to help them better understand God's ways? Why might Paul have done this?

4. In Romans 9:6-18, what attributes, powers, qualities, and truths about God did Paul reveal or tell his readers to consider?

5. What do you conclude when you read Bible verses or teachings in the Bible that appear to be contradictory?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

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