

Romans 9:9-13

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The word of promise calls back to God's promise that he would give Abraham and Sarah a son.

This was the foundational promise God made to start His chosen people, and Abraham responded in faith. It was God who chose Abraham, and God who willed the conception of their son Isaac. God likewise chose Isaac's son Jacob to father the tribes of Israel, rather than his elder brother Esau. Even before either Jacob or Esau were born, before either one could prove who was better, God decided it would be Jacob whom He would use for His purpose. God is God. His will is ultimately accomplished.

Paul continues his explanation of the children of the promise by referencing the promise God made to Abraham: *For this is the word of the promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son" (v 9)."*

God promised He would give Abraham a son in his old age (Genesis 17:15-17). Even though Abraham already had Ishmael as a son, God insisted that His promises would be fulfilled through Isaac. God had promised that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:5). Then He designated Isaac as being the son through whom the *word of promise* would be fulfilled.

God kept His promises, and will always keep His promises. But God decides how His promises will be kept. In this case, God decided Isaac was the child of promise. Isaac was the second son. There is a biblical pattern of the second ascending over the first.

Isaac, Abraham's son, was a promised child through whom God's promise of blessing was fulfilled: *And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac (v 10).*

God stated that His promise of a great number of descendants would be fulfilled through Isaac, and that began to take place through the birth of the *twins* Jacob and Esau who were born to *Rebekah*.

God chose the second son over the first, Jacob over Esau, to continue the line of His chosen people: *For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of words but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "the older will serve the younger (vv 11-12)."*

God fulfilled His promise, but did so in a surprising way, choosing the second over the first. Normally the firstborn had the inheritance blessing, the birthright to reign over the family. But God chose the second-born. As we will see at the end of this chapter, God also chose the Gentiles over the Jews. He did this because the Gentiles sought Him by faith (Romans 9:30-32).

There is a discernible theme of sonship in the book of Romans. Who are the true children of Abraham? Who are those that inherit the promises of God? Paul explained in the previous chapter,

“The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him”
(Romans 8:16,17)

Those of the promise are those whom God has chosen. As we see in from Romans 8:17, those who believe are children of God without condition. All who believe are heirs of God. But only those who suffer the sufferings of Christ will also “be glorified with Him.” To be glorified with Christ is to receive the “glory and honor” of reigning over the earth, as humans were created and designed to do (Hebrews 2:5-10).

Paul is building an argument that those who are born of faith and live by faith are the true children of the promise (which he says outright in Romans 9:30). All who believe are children, but only those who walk by faith, overcoming rejection from the world, will co-reign with Him (Romans 8:17b; Revelation 3:21).

God chooses who will inherit the rewards He promises. Paul uses the Old Testament yet again to prove his point; in Romans 9:25, he quotes one of Hosea’s prophecies regarding God’s sovereignty to choose as His those who were not from His people.

God decides who are the children of His promise. These verses provide a specific example where God chose a child of the promise before the child had done anything. God did not choose Esau, but Jacob. God can do whatever He wants to do. The fact that He chose to make the children of faith the true children of promise just means that He decided to do that. He decided that Jacob would be the one through whom the promise of a great nation would be fulfilled—before Jacob was born—just as God decided about the Gentiles long before (Romans 9: 24).

Since God tells us to love those who hate us, verse 13 seems confusing—as at first glance it appears to say that God hated someone before they were even born: *Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved but Esau I hated”* (v 13). Further, God greatly blessed Esau, which would seem to make it even more troubling; why would anyone greatly bless someone they hated? Another passage involving a choice might shed some light.

The word translated *hate* is the Greek word "miseao." Another New Testament passage that uses "miseao" in the context of a selection between two possibilities might provide an answer. Luke 16:13 uses "miseao" to describe the situation when someone has two masters. The verse says we cannot serve them both, we have to pick one. It goes on to say that by not picking one, we hate or despise the one not selected. In this case it seems reasonable to infer that it is not the person being rejected as a person, but as a master or ruler.

Luke 16:13 states that the master that is selected is loved, or held to, because they were chosen to fill the office of "master." So love and hate appear here to apply to which person is selected. The selection of the firstborn was a choice of who would lead the family.

In a similar manner, it seems in the case of Romans 9:13 that God selects from two twins, Jacob and Esau, which one will continue the blessing of Abraham and be the leader of the family; the one through whom the line would continue. This person will inherit the promise and fill this office of leadership.

God chooses (loves) one and does not choose (*hates*) the other. So he loves the one he chooses, and hates the one He does not choose, using the same language as in Luke 16:13 concerning the choice of a master. But in the same way, this does not mean God hates Esau as a person. The result of this choice made by God is that Esau did not inherit the blessing of Abraham, since he was not chosen to be Abraham's heir. The blessing of Abraham was that he would inherit the Promised Land and provide a blessing to the entire world through a promised messiah (Genesis 12:2-3).

Romans 9:13 is actually a quote from the Old Testament, Malachi 1:2–3, which upon examination supports this idea further. It seems from the Malachi passage that God is not speaking just of the individuals Jacob and Esau, but of the nations they bore. Malachi 1:2 begins with a statement and a question addressed to the nation of Israel (another name for Jacob):

“‘I have loved you,’ says the Lord. But you say, ‘How have You loved us?’”

The question “How have You loved us?” is answered in Malachi with the verse quoted in Romans 9:13 (*Jacob I loved but Esau I hated*):

“‘Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the Lord.
‘Yet I have loved Jacob;
but I have hated Esau,
and I have made his mountains a desolation
and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.’”
(Malachi 1:2-3)

Esau was blessed by God in a mighty way as Jacob was; God made him into a large nation—the nation of Edom. And when Israel entered the Promised Land after coming out of Egypt, God instructed Israel to keep their hands off Edom, because God gave that land to Esau's descendants, in Deuteronomy 2:4–6.

God blessed Esau, but God did not bless Esau with the blessing of inheriting the promise He made when He blessed Abraham; that blessing went to Jacob. Jacob inherited Abraham's mantle to father a nation through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:2-3).

More than a thousand years after Deuteronomy, when the book of Malachi was written, God has judged Edom, has laid waste "his mountains"—referring to the land God gave Edom in Deuteronomy 2, Mount Seir. So this Malachi passage is speaking of the nations and referring to Jacob and Esau in their capacity as the respective founders of each nation.

Paul's quote in Romans 9:13 seems to use "miseao" (*hate*) in the same way as Luke 16:13, not to refer to the person as a person, but to the fact that that person was not selected for the leadership position. Conversely, the one selected for the position is "loved." This interpretation seems to correlate with the Bible's insistence that God loves each person in the world (John 3:16).

In fact, God so loved the world that He gave His only Son to pay for the sins of the world (John 3:16). It also answers a seeming contradiction to the idea that God "hates" Esau as a person, since God hugely blessed Esau and made him into a great nation as well. But not the nation

through whom would come the Messiah Jesus, to bless all the families of the earth; that was reserved for Jacob, later renamed Israel (Genesis 12:2-3).

Paul is clear that in using these examples God was the one acting, not man. God did not look at what man had done, because our works are meaningless to Him apart from obeying Him. Rather, God, sovereign over all, chose Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, to accomplish His will. Esau was rejected by God to inherit the mantle of leadership, not for anything Esau had done or had not done. God chose Jacob instead of Esau for His own purposes.

Why? The answer comes in the following verses. Paul expects many questions in response to what he is teaching here.

Biblical Text

⁹ For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰ And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹ for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹² it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”