



Pastor Kyle Mercer
How Should Christians Respond to Unbelief?

August 9, 2026
Series: Sovereign
Romans 9:1-13

**BIG IDEA – GOD'S FAITHFULNESS, HUMAN UNBELIEF, AND THE
SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN SALVATION**

Good morning, Two Cities Church, across all of our campuses. Guys, we have a theme for this year. If we haven't been obvious, the theme is *Centered and Sent*, and we are serious about sending. In fact, we're making the rest of the month of August "Multiply Month," and each week I'm going to get up here and introduce you to one of our three church planters who are going out.

We started with Spencer and Olivia. Can we give them a round of applause? Guys, as you can see in that video... If you're new, you may not know this. We're only 10 years old as a church, and Spencer and Olivia have been with us all 10 years. They were on our launch team. I did their premarital counseling. Guys, losing Spencer is going to be like losing my left arm. He's up here. He's one of our teaching pastors. He started and oversaw our college ministry. He also currently oversees our missions.

So, here's what I want you to know. We are serious about sending, and that means we send our best. Here's what we're going to do. This is kind of crazy. If you grew up in church, you may have never been to a church like *this* before, because in most churches, here's what happens. The pastor gets up and says, "Please stay. I'll do anything if you'll just come back for one more Sunday, and if there's something you don't like about this church, we'll change it so you can stay."

We're kind of a strange church, because I'm going to get up here from now until May and basically say, "Will you please leave our church?" Here's the problem: the best people always leave. Some of you we've been trying to get to leave for a long time. You just won't leave.

So, here's the thing. We're going to be saying a lot of gospel goodbyes. It's when you say goodbye because of the good news. It's when people move for mission. Here's the thing. Spencer already has five Community Group leaders and their wives and families committed to go. That's great too, but here's what this means. You have to understand this. Normal people like you do this. They leave. They move to Charlotte.

You have to understand that means husbands and wives talk to each other, and then they sit around the kitchen table with their kids and say, "Mom and Dad have a big decision we just made, and it means you're going to be going to a different school and growing up in a different city, and I believe God is going to bless that."

But here's the thing. We can't do that and then have the rest of us do nothing while we stay here. So, here are your two options: You can go with one of our church plants, or I hope you feel re-called here. You just have to go, "What am I doing at Novant hospital or Atrium?" or "What am I doing at Reynolds? If people are going to go move their lives for the sake of mission, I'd better start living more missionally here." Guys, that's our hope.

Listen. If you're at all interested, or maybe you're going to want to give this text code to somebody else if you know somebody who lives in Charlotte, text "CLT" (Yes, that is the airport code as well...*CLT*.) Some of you would like to live closer to an airport where you could have a direct flight anywhere you wanted to. You could do this.

Text "CLT" to 39808, and then on September 20, which will be here before we know it, we're going to have interest meetings for all three church planters and their plants after the 11:00 service, three separate gatherings at the same time here. So, if you're interested, you'll want to text "CLT" and show up for those meetings. With that said, let's pray, and we're going to dive into Romans, chapter 9.

Lord, we are just grateful. We need people who go out for the sake of your name. The Bible says, "Honor such people," and that's what we're trying to do. We pray for individuals and young couples and families and empty nesters, maybe even people who find themselves single again for some reason, that they might feel called. Lord, as we talk about The Oaks Church, I am so grateful for the 30 people who moved *here*. We just pray you would build a strong launch team for The Oaks Church. We pray a blessing on them as they go. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right. You can turn to Romans 9. We are in a brand-new series within a series. It's called *Sovereign*. That might be a big, scary word for you guys. Here's what we're doing. Just get ready. We are going into the deep end of the theological pool. It's pool season for a couple more weeks. Every pool you've ever been to has a rope. Right? That rope is where you tell all of the little kids, "Don't go past that rope."

If you're on one side of the rope, you can splash and stand and it's 3 feet deep. As soon as you go under the rope, it's 6 feet, 8 feet, 10 feet, or 12 feet. There's a diving board. People are playing sharks and minnows. It's a dangerous place. Here's what we're doing today. As a church (we're all going to do this together across all of our campuses), we're going to go under the rope together, and I'm going to be your tour guide and lifeguard. I might have to save some of you guys.

So, here's what we're going to do. Romans 9-11 is the most avoided part of Romans. Most people don't preach through the book of Romans. If they preach through Romans, they don't normally go through 9, 10, and 11. If they do, they normally do one sermon as an overview. Guys, we are going to be in Romans 9-11 until Halloween, if you celebrate it. That's how long we're going to be in this. We're going to be in here for a while as we dive in.

Now, think about it this way. It's about Israel. It's about God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Romans 9 is Israel's *past*, Romans 10 is Israel's *present*, and Romans 11 is Israel's *future*. Romans 9 and Romans 11 are probably the two most famous chapters, at least in the New Testament, on God's sovereignty. Romans 10 is probably the most famous chapter in the New Testament on man's responsibility.

So, what's going to happen here is we're going to have a conversation. Well, you're going to sit there and I'm going to talk, but it's going to kind of be like a conversation. We're going to have a conversation for a couple of months together about man's responsibility and God's sovereignty.

Now, in the 10 years I've been doing this, week in, week out, we have had people get upset with me because they think I have emphasized God's sovereignty too much. We have other people who have gotten upset because when I was preaching through John... This is a true story. This was a long time ago. This was two buildings ago. They thought, when I was preaching through John's gospel, I didn't emphasize the sovereignty of God enough. But I'm just like the apostle Paul. I'm just dealing with both. That's what I'm trying to do here.

So, here's what we're going to do. I'm going to read you guys Romans 9:1-13, and we're going to begin a conversation today. You're going to wrestle, and it's going to be a good thing. We're *all* going to wrestle. Now, here's how important Romans 9 is. Some of you have heard of John Piper. He was probably one of the most famous pastors in America for a good decade or two.

Before he was a pastor (that's how most of us know him) or conference speaker or author, he was a seminary professor. This is a true story. I heard him tell this story. He was teaching his seminary students Romans, chapter 9, and dealing with all of the

debates and the discussions and the dialogue and the division over it. Then he'd go home at night, and he'd pray and read Romans 9.

He felt God speak to his heart. "The God of Romans 9 will not just be pondered; he will be praised and proclaimed. He will not just be analyzed; he will be adored." He went in the next day and handed in his resignation and put his name in to be a pastor, because he wanted to see if he could, by the grace of God, build a church with a vision of God that comes out of Romans 9.

With that said... That's a lot, I know, but we have to introduce these things. Let me read you Romans 9:1-13. You're going to see in verse 11 the word *election*. It's the first time that word comes up. I'm going to begin to talk to us about that at the end today. He's going to make a whole argument about this. Then, next week will probably be the most difficult theological sermon I have preached to date, because Paul will deal with all of the questions people have.

So, what's going to happen is I'm going to introduce some things to you today, and you're going to have a lot of questions. If you have questions, I want you to email me directly at "david@twocitieschurch.net." No. And thank you in advance to our Community Group leaders. They're going to have a fun time. All right. Here it is.

"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."

This is what Paul is going to begin to deal with today. ***"But it is not as though the word of God has failed."*** We can all feel that at some point. "God has said things, and I don't see them." ***"For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel..."*** Yes, we're going to talk about Israel a lot, and it's also in your news feed a lot.

"...and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' 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 offspring. For this is what the promise said: 'About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.' And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac..."

Here's the key sentence Paul has been building toward: ***"...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of***

election might continue..." Or the word is *stand*. Same thing. ***"...not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, 'The older...'"*** Which was surprising. That would be Esau. ***"...will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"***

What we're going to talk about today and the next few weeks is not hard to understand, but it is hard to accept. Romans 9 is the foundation for everything we just celebrated in Romans 8. See, what we're going to do, starting today, even more next week, is we're going to have the theological... You didn't know this coming to church today, but we're having the theological "birds and the bees" talk together.

See, what happened is my son Elon, when he was 9 years old (he's 10 now; this was in the spring), came home from playing with some kids in the neighborhood and with his older brother William. He came home, and he was very excited. He said, "Dad, I was talking to the older kids in the neighborhood, and they told me you need to have the birds and bees conversation with me."

He said, "I was talking to a couple of them. Their dad had the birds and bees conversation with them, and you need to have it with me." He goes, "But they did tell me, once you have the birds and bees conversation with me, I'll never look at you and Mom the same again." True story.

The same thing happens with God. Once you have the theological birds and bees talk with somebody, which is what we're going to begin to do, you never see God the same. See, here's the thing. Most 9-year-olds say they want to have the birds and bees talk, but they really don't want to know what happens in the bedroom and the hospital room.

When you have the birds and bees talk with somebody at that age, one of their responses is fear. That *can* be a response as we begin to get into these things. It is certainly going to give you a different view of God and a different view of yourself if you've never studied this passage. We're going to begin to do that today, but over the next few weeks, I think that's going to happen.

But before we get into Paul's theology, I want to look at Paul's heart. Before we think about how Paul thinks, I want you to see how Paul feels. Let's go back to verse 1. ***"I am speaking the truth in Christ..."*** *That's pretty intense, Paul. Could you just say, "Speaking the truth"? "Speaking the truth in Christ." That's pretty intense.*

"...I am not lying..." *Okay. We get it, Paul. Why would you tell someone you're not lying? Only if they're thinking you're lying. Right? When something really important happens, you go, "I'm not lying. Listen. I really met him. He was at the..." You know, whatever. "...my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit..."*

Now look. Paul is taking an oath. This is pretty intense. Normally, when Paul says, "In the presence of Christ Jesus the Lord..." When he says that to Timothy, he goes, "Preach the Word." We're expecting him to say something really intense. Why would Paul need to say, "I swear"? What is Paul about to tell us that we wouldn't believe? Here's what it is: that he loves Jewish people.

Now, if you think about it for a couple of seconds, it makes sense why he would have to say, "Guys, I really do love Jewish people." No one believed him because he left being Jewish. I mean, he's going to say they're his kinsmen, but he's like, "Guys..." He was a professional Jewish person. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He says another place, "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin."

Not only that, but what is he trying to do every time he talks to the Jewish people? He's trying to get them to convert to Christ. Then, how do they respond? Well, they're really mad at him. They beat him up (we read that last week), they hit him with rods, they whip him, they stone him, and they put him in prison. By the way, Paul is saying, "Just because people reject Christ, I don't reject them."

Is there anybody in your life you would need to convince that you still love them because they've rejected Christ? Like, we're all going to have... It may be a soft rejection. Your dad thinks church is a crutch for you. He has rejected Christ. Your sister (you know, the popular phrase) is against organized religion. I guess she would like disorganized religion. I don't know. Your friends at work think you're crazy, because everybody only gets two days off, but you use half of one of your days off to be *here*. If you serve, like, half your day... You know what I'm saying?

Paul says he has a heart for people. So, we need to have Paul's tears, not just Paul's theology. We need to have Paul's burdens. Let me read this to you. Look at what Paul says in verse 2. **"...that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."** Now, if you're reading this, this is emotional whiplash.

Think about it. When the letter of Romans was written, there were no chapters. Paul is not like, "Now write verse 7." He's not doing that. He just writes the letter. We don't get the chapters until the 1200s. We don't get the verses until the 1300s. We're grateful, because it makes it easy to find things, but normally, you would have just read Romans 8, and then you'd get to Romans 9.

It's kind of confusing, because in Romans 8, Paul is like, "We're more than conquerors. Everything is going to work for our good. Nothing is going to separate us from the love of God, and God is going to give us all things." He's Mount Everest, celebrating, super excited, and then all of a sudden he says, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

Let me tell you... You've probably never been told this before. Some people think, "To be a Christian means I'm happy all the time." No. Actually, to be a Christian means you're sad all the time. Did you know that? Paul says he's sorrowful yet always rejoicing. You're sad all the time, because if you're thinking about people you love who don't know Christ, you'll be sad all the time. Most men don't know what to do with that. Most male depression is wrongly diagnosed as anger, because men don't know what to do with negative emotion. Paul goes, "I'm sad all the time."

Billy Bob Thornton... Don't act like you don't know him. I know you've been watching *Landman*. Yeah, he dated Angelina Jolie...all that kind of stuff. When he was in his 30s, his brother died. I saw an interview with him recently about it. He said, "Since my brother died, I'm 50 percent sad every day of my life." He said, "It never goes away." We all have this. Right?

Some of you in here can imagine. Your daughter gets married, and you're ecstatic. You're at the wedding ceremony or the wedding reception, and you're ecstatic. Your daughter is married. You love your son-in-law...all that kind of stuff. Then you have this moment where you think, "I wish my dad was here." You realize your dad passed years ago, and your dad didn't get to be... So, you weirdly have this mingling of emotions.

Here's what happens. When you're a Christian and go home for Thanksgiving and sit down at Thanksgiving dinner and realize four of your family members don't believe, you're really sad. The problem with us is we don't let ourselves feel sad. Paul said he's sad because they're cursed and cut off from Christ.

Let me tell you how we tend... We're very American. We're very modern people, even though we're Christians. We think about the immediate, temporary benefits of being a Christian, and normally, that's what we're sad people aren't experiencing. We look at someone, and we're like, "He's addicted, but if he came to Christ, God could help with that addiction, and he wouldn't be destroying his life."

We think, "Man, she's a spender. If she would just understand the biblical principles and give her life to Christ and read Dave Ramsey, she would get everything organized." We think, "Their family is a mess. Their kids are crazy, but if they would just have a biblically ordered home, then their kids would be fine. Their marriage is a 4 out of 10, but if they would just read Ephesians 5 and he would understand his Christlike role..."

None of that's wrong. People do come to Christ, and it does help their lives. Thank God for that. A lot of the practical applications I'm giving you guys, often, are for your marriage and all that. Paul goes, "I believe in hell, and I believe people who don't

know and love Christ and repent of their sin go there, and I know a lot of those people. It's not like an intellectual exercise for me; it's a very emotional thing."

In fact, do you see what he says in verse 3? He says, "I could wish..." You can see it in the English. It's even more clear in the Greek. Paul is like, "It's not possible, but I could wish that I could be separated and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers." In other words, Paul goes, "I love non-Christians so much I actually wish I could go to hell. I'd be willing to go to hell if they would go to heaven." He's talking about substitution, which is at the heart of the gospel. It's what Christ has done for us.

By the way, it's at the heart of love. I know a guy whose son was diagnosed as a teenager with type 1 diabetes. Some of you have type 1 diabetes. It's a chronic, lifelong, "watch your blood sugar," "give yourself a shot." I mean, it's a lifelong thing. This dad was looking at his 16-year-old son who has this, and I remember he said to me, "If I could trade places with him, I would. I wouldn't even need to pray about it. I'd just be like, 'Here, I'll take it and you can...'" But he couldn't.

Paul is like, "Guys, that's how much I believe in hell and how much I love lost people. I would trade places, but I can't." In fact, look at this. Paul says in a different place... I don't know if you've ever put this together. Paul says in Philippians 1:

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ [go to heaven], for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account."

So, here's Paul's theology of heaven and hell and how it motivated him. Paul goes, "I would go to hell for nonbelievers, and I will stay out of heaven to help believers." Most of us want to go to heaven, but we'd like to stay out of it for as long as possible so we can enjoy our lives here. We want to die at 85 years old with a Bible on our chest in our sleep. Paul goes, "The only reason I don't want to be in heaven right now is so I can help the church on earth. That's why I'm here."

Okay. It's an emotional beginning. Then Paul needs to talk about Israel. This is Israel's past, but it's their present too. Let me show you this. It says, ***"They are Israelites..."*** The people he loves, the Jewish people. Listen. He's going to say eight advantages, eight privileges, eight benefits the nation of Israel had that no other nation on earth had. Here's what they are.

"They are Israelites, and to them..." Here come the advantages. ***"...belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the***

promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."

Let's go through these advantages so that you understand. Paul believes in the sovereignty of God. That's what we're talking about here. But Paul goes, "I am just shocked. I'm absolutely shocked that the Jewish people don't believe." He goes, "First of all, they had adoption."

In other words, he's not talking Romans 8 adoption. He's saying, "God chose Israel and said, 'You're going to be my firstborn.'" He uses that language with the exodus, bringing them out of Egypt. "And I'm going to know you and reveal myself to you like I will do no other nation."

Then, on top of that, it says they had the glory and the worship. Here's what that means: they got to have spiritual experiences no other people and no other nation got to have. They had a visible GPS in the Old Testament...cloud by day, fire by night. They got to see the plagues. They had this unbelievable experience of the manifest presence of God.

On top of that, he says they have all of the promises and all of the covenants. They have 300 prophecies about the coming of Christ. God said, "I'll put something in the sky (the rainbow). I'll put something on the men (circumcision). I'll give you signs and symbols that you won't forget me, because they're going to be everywhere."

Then, on top of all that, it says they were given the law. Now, this is interesting. Of the 66 books in your Bible, how many of them were written by Jewish people? Sixty-four of them. There are only two books not written by Jewish people, and they're written by the same guy. Luke wrote Luke and Acts. Outside of that, every book in your Bible was written by Jewish people.

Then Paul goes, "And then you had the patriarchs." Yes, I mean, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Basically, Paul is like, "You had all of these godly examples: Ruth and Esther and David and Noah. You had imperfect examples, but you had examples of faith." So, Paul goes, "I can't believe it."

Now, here's what we would call these people today: *religiously lost*, which is a phrase I started to use when I got to Winston. I could have used it in Greensboro. I lived there for a while. I could have used it in Durham, but there was something... And it's probably more true in Lexington and even more true in Davie. There are religiously lost people. They are in church, but they're not in Christ. They've been baptized, but they don't really believe. They're kind of convinced intellectually, but they're not converted at the heart level.

My fear is that in a church like this... And there are a lot of good churches. In any good church, you can have a ton of spiritual experiences. You come to the Heights. You go to prayer and worship nights. You come experience our services here. You can have amazing patriarchs, great godly parents, great pastors, great mentors, and great youth leaders. You can have the Word of God in your language, and your parents can give you a teen Bible in the New Living Translation for you to take journal notes. Spiritual privilege is not the same as spiritual life.

By the way, parents, it's a good thing to give your kids spiritual advantages. Everybody is worried about giving their kid every other type of advantage. "He'd better play on the club team." You know, "If he plays on the club team and we spend \$30,000 a year, he might be able to play bad Division III soccer." People do that all the time.

"We need to get him the private tutor. If they don't get into *this* school, then they can't go to... If they don't get into *this* school, then there's no chance they could ever get into Wake." We do that. If you're going to do that, do that, but have spiritual advantages be more important to you than your academic, activity, and sports advantages.

So, then Paul has to talk about Israel. Verse 6 is where, I think, it gets very interesting. Here's what he says in verse 6: ***"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel..."*** This may not make sense. Why is Paul talking about this? Because if you are a first-generation Jewish person... Say you're a Messianic Jew, so you now believe. You're a Christian.

So, you're reading this, and you go, "All of these Romans 8 promises are so awesome, but I actually remember God made a lot of promises to Israel about all of the things he was going to do for Israel, and Israel is a mess, so maybe God doesn't keep his word." By the way, the unbelief of Israel, which you probably don't think about much... The unbelief of the Jewish people is a massive deal.

In America right now, of all of the American Jewish people, less than 1 percent believe in Jesus. Two percent of Americans are Jewish. When I was doing ministry at Duke University (I just looked this up), 12 percent of the student body at Duke is Jewish. So, I was interacting with Jewish men all the time in the fraternities. It felt like 50 percent of fraternities were Jewish men.

I saw (we'll talk about this in a couple of weeks) the veil that's over them when you talk about Christ. I saw the hardening. I went to Israel in 2022, and we connected through Munich. You get on the plane from Munich to Tel Aviv, and you're like the only non-Jewish person on there. It's a weird... You know, there's kosher

immediately, and everybody is reading Hebrew. I'm not making fun. I'm saying you see the curls. You see the yarmulkes.

Then you go to the Wailing Wall, and at the Wailing Wall, people are crying and putting notes in the wall. I asked my tour guide, who was a Messianic Jew, "What are they doing?" He was like, "Oh, they're praying for the Messiah." This is the saddest thing I've ever seen. A lot of religion, no Christ.

So, Paul goes, "Guys, what are we going to do with the massive amount of unbelief?" His answer is in verse 6. I'll read it to you. I didn't read the second part. He says, "***But it is not as though the word of God has failed.***" This is what Paul is going to defend for the next chapter or more. "***For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel...***"

What does that mean? There are two Israels. By the way, Israel and ethnic Israel and the land of Israel and end times... We'll get into all this, kind of. Christians can disagree on these things. It's a huge conversation. Obviously, it's in our news feeds and on X and all this kind of stuff.

Here's what Paul definitely is saying. There are two Israels. There is a physical Israel and a spiritual Israel. Let me explain how the church fathers talked about it. When it comes to the church, there is a visible church and an invisible church. Right now, across all of our campuses, everybody in here is part of the *visible* church. It's the church we can see.

There may be a few or more people in here who say, "I'm here, but I don't believe this at all," but I'm talking about everybody who shows up and goes, "I believe this." It's everyone we have in a Community Group. It's like, "Okay. That's the visible church." The *invisible* church are all of the people in the visible church who are really Christians. Now, in a very healthy church, hopefully, there's a lot of overlap, and the invisible church, which is the true church, is taking up most of the visible church. That happens.

That's why we are very careful in who we baptize. That's why if you're living in unrepentant sin, we confront you. Why? Well, because the Bible says you can't live in open, unrepentant sin and be a Christian. So, if we're confronting you in that and you don't respond, and then you say you're not a Christian anymore, that clarifies what's going on here.

So, Paul goes, "It's not as though the word of God has failed." Now, here's what he's going to do. This is where it starts to get deep. Paul is going to now tell us two stories from the Old Testament. He's going to do biblical theology and talk about the story of Abraham and Isaac and the story of Jacob and Esau. Or really, it's Isaac and Ishmael,

Jacob and Esau. Here's the problem with you and me: we know Disney stories better than we know the biblical stories.

If I was in here and said to you guys, "This is kind of like in *Frozen*," you'd all be like, "Oh, yeah. Talk about it." You would know all of the details of it. But when we tell the biblical stories, oftentimes we don't know enough about it. So, here's what Paul is doing. Paul goes, "Guys, I'm teaching you something you think is going to be new, but it's very old. I'm not doing revisionist history where I'm making up something in the past to line up with what's in the future now."

He said, "I want to show you from these two stories." So, I'm going to try to do the same thing, and this will begin our conversation on election. Paul is basically going to say there are two Israels. There's a spiritual Israel and a physical Israel. He's going to get into this idea that God chooses. You'll see this. Let's go to verse 7.

"...and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring..." Just because they came from him physically. ***"...but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh..."*** So, now he's using different words for Israel. ***"...the children of the flesh [ethnic Israel] who are the children of God, but the children of the promise [spiritual Israel] are counted as offspring. For this is what the promise said: 'About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.'"***

I'll tell the story really quickly, because he gives more time to the story of Jacob and Esau. Abraham and Sarah were really old. God picked Abraham. He chose him. I mean, how else do you read that story? Abraham wasn't looking for God. God was looking for Abraham. God wasn't lost. Abraham was lost. Abraham was worshiping pagans. Abraham's dad was worshiping pagans...all that stuff. By the way, it seems like none of us have a problem with God choosing Abraham.

Anyway, he chooses Abraham. Then he says, "Hey, Abraham and Sarah, you guys are really old, but you're going to have a kid." This is important. "You're going to have a kid by my power and my promise." Abraham and Sarah are like, "Uh, we're almost in diapers. I'm not sure we're ready to take care of somebody in diapers." You know, that's kind of what they were saying. God is like, "You're going to do it."

But then it's not working in their minds. Basically then... You know, you can't believe this. It's like a Netflix show. Then Sarah says, "Hey, I have this young, good-looking, fertile maidservant. She's an Egyptian. Her name is Hagar. Just sleep with her one time, and then she'll give us a kid." So, he does that, and that's how we get Ishmael.

He basically goes to God, and he's like, "Look at what I did. We're going to do this together. This is awesome." God is like, "That's not what I'm doing. I told you I was

going to do this by my power, by my presence, and by my promise." So, they have Isaac. Now, here's the interesting thing. He uses an example. He goes, "Look. God chose Isaac, and he didn't choose Ishmael."

Now, people who read the story go, "Well, I know why he didn't choose Ishmael. It's because Ishmael is part Egyptian and it's not a pure Jewish line. And Ishmael is kind of a jerk. He mocks Isaac. Isaac is born right as Ishmael becomes a teenager. So, God did it because of all that. God didn't just pick Isaac for no reason; he picked him because he was better." He goes, "I knew you were going to say that, so now I'm going to tell you the story of Jacob and Esau."

Here, I'll show you this. By the way, these are ancient, ancient stories, like, "beginning of Genesis" stories. ***"And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac..."*** So, he's following the line...Abraham, Isaac. This is the key verse. This is what you're going to have to wrestle with. We'll wrestle with it together. You may come to a different conclusion, but we're going to wrestle with it together.

"...though they were not yet born..." So, one wasn't born before the other and then God chose because one was better. ***"...and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue..."*** Then Paul wants to clarify it even more. ***"...not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'"***

This is what Paul is doing. He's like, "I'm going to give you the most extreme example to show this is true." So, he says, "Do you remember how Isaac and Rebekah...?" Rebekah finds herself pregnant with twins. It says they were even fighting in the womb. You have Jacob and Esau. Remember? Jacob is more of a mama's boy. He's cooking with her in the kitchen. He drives a Prius. You know what I'm talking about? I'm seeing if you're paying attention.

Then there's Esau. Esau is really close with his dad. His name means red and hairy. So, he comes out looking like Elmo. This is kind of what we have here. (We need to laugh, because it's about to get serious.) So, they're in the womb. Esau comes out first, so he's older, and it says God chose Jacob, not Esau.

Now, it can't be because of the mom, and it can't be because of the dad, because they're the same. It can't be because of something that happened in the womb, because they were both in the womb. It can't be the birth order, because God reversed it. It can't even be who was a better person, because they were both terrible people. Just keep reading.

People are like, "Esau. Yeah, he was the idiot who gave up his birthright for a bowl of soup." It's like, "Yeah, and his brother took advantage of him in his greatest time of need." Jacob is a liar. He lies to his dad while he's old and blind. He lies to his father-in-law. When they finally reconcile toward the end of their life, it appears that Esau is the better guy. He's more eager to forgive even though he'd been more greatly sinned against.

So, what does verse 13 mean? Paul is going to write this verse, and then... Because I don't have two hours, I can't go into the next section, but everything I just said in verses 11-13, Paul is going to answer all of the questions we have in light of it. Let me just read it. **"As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"**

Now, people struggle with this. This verse, just for the record, is not in Genesis; this verse is in Malachi. Genesis is the first book of the Old Testament; Malachi is the last book. By the way, Jacob and Esau... I believe this is about individuals. Everything in Romans is individual and personal, but Jacob and Esau become nations, just like *your* kids will. I mean, if you think long enough, your kids are going to live lives and have families and have kids and grandkids and all that.

So, what does "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" mean? Well, think about it. Jesus actually also uses the exact same Greek word for *hate* when *he's* teaching. I'll show you this. This is Luke 14. **"Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother...'"** You're like, "Wait a second. I thought we're supposed to honor our father and mother."

Then he says, **"...and wife..."** Could you imagine going home and saying, "I was doing my Bible study, and Jesus said I was supposed to hate you"? She's going to be like, "Keep reading. You're not reading it in context." Because we know Ephesians 5 and other places.

"...and children..." It's like, "Okay. Well, Jesus says we're supposed to love our children and raise them in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Children came to him, and he loves children. So, he doesn't mean *that*." **"...and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."**

Obviously, he's not saying you're supposed to hate your parents. He's saying you are supposed to prefer him over them. It's the same idea. "Jacob, I loved; Esau, I have rejected." All of this is kind of intense, and it makes us go back to verse 11. Let me read it one more time and try to unpack this as we close and wrestle with it together. Here's verse 11. You just tell me what you think it means.

Here's what's interesting. Every once in a while, I'll teach a doctrine, and people will come up to me afterward and say, "I love everything about this church except this one thing you teach." I say, "The reason you love everything about this church is the hermeneutic." That's how I study the Scriptures. I say, "That's what you love. You actually love the commitment to try to just say what the text is saying."

You can try over the next few weeks... Good luck trying to do relational gymnastics so that somehow it ends up that *election* means you pick God. We'll see how that works. It takes so much work, in my opinion, to try to make Romans 9 say the opposite of what it's saying. I'm just going to put it out there, and we're all going to wrestle with it together.

So, here's what it says: ***"...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls..."*** So, God has a purpose in choosing people, but it has nothing to do with what's inside of them. God does not do "Eeny, meeny, miny...heaven."

There's a reason the word *purpose*... I mean, God doesn't do anything with no purpose. What he's saying is the reason you're a Christian has nothing to do with your descent (who you came from), nothing to do with your decision, ultimately (though you made a decision after God made a decision), and nothing to do with you deserving it.

Now, here's what's interesting. Karl Barth studied Romans deeper than almost anybody. When he got to Romans 9, this is what he said: "The more a man finds these texts to be harsh, the more he is wedded to his own righteousness." Basically, I didn't bring anything to my salvation except the sin that made it necessary.

But this is hard. Here's why this is hard. One question is like, "Wait. Isn't it unjust for God to do this?" That's literally the next verse. Paul is going to go, "Is God unjust?" and then he's going to unpack all this. We'll look at it all together. You may come to some different conclusions. I'll show you all this next week.

Here's the problem: We live in a man-centered world; God lives in a God-centered world. Normally, when we talk about these things, here's what people think. Let me try to articulate what you feel. "No, no, no. I have to be free enough to choose. God must respect my freedom. At the end of the day, I am free enough to choose God or not choose God, and it ends with me."

Have you ever thought about this? You're putting *your* freedom above *God's* freedom. Some people say, "No, no. It has to be about my decision, ultimately. It's my decision. I remember. I was in high school. I even have the shirt, 'I decided to follow Jesus.' I

sang the song, 'I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.'" Well, is *your* decision more important than *God's* decision? Are *your* rights more important than *God's* rights?

Listen. There's a way to read this to go, "You know what? Actually, God chose Christ and he foresaw faith." Paul doesn't need to write the rest of Romans 9 if this isn't shocking and we don't have a lot of questions. If you don't have a lot of questions, you're not thinking about this rightly.

Basically, Paul has used this... This doctrine is supposed to be a great comfort to us. This doctrine is actually... You'll see. I think this will make sense in a few weeks. This doctrine is actually supposed to be a huge encouragement for evangelism, because basically it says anybody could believe. *Anybody*.

Actually, when we get to the very end of Romans 11, Paul ends with praise and worship and wonder. He says, ***"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.***" That's where we're headed in a few months.

Here's how I want to end. I want to end not just with Paul's theology but with Paul's tears; not just with our minds but with our hearts. I want us to have Paul's burden. So, here's what I want you to know. If you found yourself here today, and maybe you came here and you're not a Christian...

By the way, the Bible says... I believe both things. I believe God ultimately chooses, but I believe God works on people's hearts and draws people to himself, and you need to make a decision. I want to tell you, if you're here today and you're not a Christian, you're here because somebody in your life was brokenhearted over you, just like Paul was brokenhearted over Israel.

Some of you are sitting here. You're a teenager or whatever. You came with your parents, and you don't even know. You *do* know, but you *don't* know. You don't know that they've been praying for your salvation since the day you were born. You don't know that every once in a while, when they're praying at night in bed, it's sometimes hard to pray for you because they do get emotional when they pray for you.

Some of you may be here today, and you're here because someone invited you, and they don't even live in this city. They told you, "You need to go to church," and you showed up by yourself. Listen. Someone is brokenhearted over you. If, in all of this talk about election and things, we lose our brokenheartedness over people, then I've taught this wrong or you've received this wrong.

In fact, what I want us to do in a minute is, as we sing (we're going to sing together), I want you to come forward and say, "God, would you break my heart for what breaks yours? Would you let it be okay that I'm going to be sad a lot if I'm going to really think about people's spiritual condition? But, God, you're going to use that. You're going to use that in *my* life. You're going to use that in other people's lives."

I just want to encourage you guys. This is what we do. I mean, this is not in the normal playbook to do for megachurches: teach through Romans 9-11 in the fall on God's sovereignty. No playbook says to do that. I'm doing that because we want to be the type of church that can wrestle deeply with God.

To me, there are a couple of different conclusions you might come to in the weeks and months to come. This is a secondary issue. I'll talk more about that next week. But I'm more excited and more hopeful of the process of wrestling with God and his Word, because we've said from day one here: our job is not to edit the Bible when the Bible confronts what we currently believe; our job is to repent, to change our minds, and to change our hearts. Let's do that together.

Lord, across all of our campuses, you are a big God. You are a sovereign God. Here's what happens. I know this. If we're thinking rightly about the idea that, God, you chose us from the foundation of the world, it actually doesn't lead to pride; it leads to humility, because there's nothing in us. It's humbling to think that we were Jacob instead of Esau. I know why this is a particularly difficult passage for people, because they think about people they know and love.

The apostle Paul, when he's crying over people, never thinks, "Are they chosen or are they not chosen?" He's just brokenhearted for them, wants them to believe, believes God can save anybody, and wants to be faithful to share the gospel, Lord. So, would you give us a theology of tears? Would you give us not just a bigger mind or bigger brain; would you give us bigger hearts? We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.