

# FATAL FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

by Steve Zeisler

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The family of Michael Durant is waiting for news of him today in Tennessee. He is being held captive as a prisoner of war in Somalia by one of the clans that are fighting the United Nations soldiers. I have a son who is near to an age when he might serve in the military, and I have been thinking a bit about what it might be like to be in that family, for parents to realize that their son is lying somewhere with a broken leg, with shrapnel and gunshot wounds in his body, having been paraded naked through the streets. His future is unknown, and it lies in the hands of desperate and unreliable people.

Let's think of what it would be like to be in their shoes, to be longing to hear good news. They wait for a phone call or a knock on the door, for somebody to say, "Mr. and Mrs. Durant, I have important news of your son---" If that were to happen, there are two questions that would come immediately to their minds: First, is the news good? And we can imagine the official spokesperson saying, "Yes, it is marvelous good news! In fact, your son is not only well, but he has accomplished the most miraculous breakthrough---he has ended the war! And there will never again be starvation in Somalia! He has single-handedly written a chapter of history in that nation. And he will be restored to you soon. It is the best possible news!"

The second question that would occur to parents in that situation is, "Is this true?" We are all familiar with the saying that has earned its right to proverbial status over and over again: If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. If a sales pitch is too remarkable or the advantages are too overwhelming, there must be a catch. If all the evidence and all the normal hopes and dreams have been drowned in good news, then we have to ask, "Are you really telling the truth?"

We have come to the ninth chapter of Romans, the place in the argument of Romans where we have to ask that second question. The first eight chapters made the powerful case that the news from heaven is the best possible news. The tragedy was a lot worse than we thought; we had no idea how desperate our condition was. There are no mitigating circumstances, no way out. The race is destined for death and hell and deserves it, and it cannot answer the problem on its own. And yet God has acted graciously in Christ who is our substitute. By his stripes we are healed, and by his Spirit we are empowered. The news is so gloriously good that it defies description. The end of Romans 8, for instance, reminds us, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all---how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?...we are more than conquerors...[nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Such good news!

But is this news too good to be true? How do we know that we can rely on these marvelous promises of God? Haven't there been gods of other peoples throughout history, other promise-makers. Is our God alone one who will not lie? Haven't we all known men and women who have abandoned the Christian faith as useless and unsuccessful in their lives, who once claimed to be Christians but now claim to be something else because in their eyes the good news failed and the promises weren't reliable?

The most profound way to ask the question, "Is the good news of Romans 1-8 true?" is to go back and see if God has kept the other promises that he has made. Before the church came into existence. God made promises to Abraham and to his progeny, the nation Israel. He made unique promises to be their God and savior. And now Paul is going to turn and ask this painful question: "Has the word of God failed for Israel? Has God rejected his people after all?" If he has, how do we know that he will not reject us as well?

## The Experience of Israel

Chapters 9-11 contain a complex argument that answers both philosophical and historical arguments that arise

from the experience of the Israelites. We are going to examine the promises God made and whether he has been true to them or not. Romans 9:1-11 must be read as a unit that builds to a wonderful climax. This is some of the most difficult material in the Bible. It is going to challenge us both spiritually and intellectually. It will assault our pride. Yet the hard questions must be answered. It is not enough to just proclaim the good news without replying to the doubts, "Can I be sure it really works? Has God's word ever failed?" Romans 9:1-5:

I speak the truth in Christ---I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit---I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

An important observation we can make immediately about this paragraph is how many times the apostle Paul refers to himself: "I am not lying...my conscience...I have great sorrow...in my heart...I could wish that I myself were cursed...." Over and over again he is speaking of his own heart and his own anguish. Although he calls on the Spirit of God as a witness to the truth of what he is saying, this is all about Paul. What makes this striking is that the end of chapter 8 is all about God---the unbreakable promises of God, the magnificent mercy of God, and the strength of his love and commitment to us. Having just spoken of God so profoundly, Paul is now speaking about himself. He does this for an important reason.

## **Grief and Praise**

When we ask the hard questions of God and require that the difficult issues be brought front-and-center, in the long run the answers are going to have a lot to do with the kind of person we are---whether we can feel some of the agony and grief that Paul feels here, and whether we can praise God as he did here at the end of verse 5. (Verse 5 anticipates a much more remarkable doxology at the end of chapter 11: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.") The section of Romans that is going to ask the hard questions has bookends: the grief and anguish of the man bringing the questions to light, and the praise of God that fills his heart. We are going to find answers, and when we do our faith will be built up, not torn down; we will draw nearer to the Lord, having heard these things---if we experience what Paul does here. If we can feel the same sort of anguish that Paul felt for those who are outside Christ, and at the same time praise God with the profound language that he does we are ready for the wrestling that lies ahead.

In 9:3 Paul makes a statement that is unparalleled in the Bible. And to call the Holy Spirit as his witness and say what he says here staggers me, frankly. He says that he is willing to suffer eternal damnation, to be cut off from Christ for the sake of those who do not know him, if it were possible. (In chapter 8 he just said that it is not possible to be separated from the love of God in Christ, but were it possible, he sees himself willingly making that choice.) I can name people for whom I would give up my life, but I don't know anyone for whose sake I would reject salvation.

Why didn't Israel respond to its Messiah. If God had made all these promises and he would keep his word, then why did the Jews who had all the advantages---the history, the opportunity, the Scripture---reject and condemn their Messiah? Doesn't it make us wonder if God really keeps his promises? That question, although unspoken, is hanging in the air. Verse 6 answers it by saying it is not the word of God that has failed.

We are going to briefly consider two ideas about the Jews to begin with. The first has to do with the advantages and the privileges that the Jews were given and that they squandered. The other is a foolish interpretation of history that they arrived at when they tried to make sense of their family tree.

## **Squandered Advantages**

The Jews assumed that the list of privileges that begins in verse 4 had indebted God to them, that the fact that they were given privileges. But Paul looks squarely at their advantages and says that they have been squandered. God is not obligated, because he has given to a people or to an individual time and time again, to

continue to give to them. We must appreciate what he has given; we must choose gratitude, not arrogance. We need to look hard at what these privileges are and ask if folks like us are not also presuming upon the Lord by thinking that because we have already received so much, we will forever continue to receive.

Let's look at the list of advantages: the adoptions as sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, the promises, and the patriarchs; and from them was traced the ancestry of Christ. There are four themes in that list of eight advantages.

The first theme is security. They had the security of having God commit himself to them by covenant. That covenant was a legal document ratified in heaven when God spoke to a terrified Abraham, amidst smoke and sacrifice (see Genesis 15). The Jews were adopted as God's children; they stood in his family. And theirs were the patriarchs, we are told. They could look back to these great men of faith who were their fathers and who lived lives that would be examples to them. And there was a feeling of security in knowing that legally they belonged in a family and a community and that it couldn't be taken from them because the covenant had been ratified. We know the same security as Christians. The covenant in our case was ratified by an empty tomb. We can have the same security as Israel had in that we have a community, a place to stand, a home; we belong because we have been adopted as sons.

The second theme is insight into the way things really were. In Paul's list of advantages he speaks of the promises or the prophecies, and the giving of the Torah, the law. This was an enormous advantage for the Jews. They were told by the prophets how God would work in history. They would see things unfold as they were promised and realize that they were given insights that no other nation had. And they were given the law of God which told them right from wrong so that they didn't have to live in a confused, crazy world; tossed like a boat on the waves of a wild sea, having no sense of moral direction. They had a moral anchor in the law. Again, we have the same advantage. We have been given the Scriptures, not just the Old Testament but the New Testament, and all of the loving care that God has taken to tell us the truth so that we live insightful lives.

A third theme is the experience of spiritual beauty. It says they saw the glory, the *Shekinah* of God, the great pillar of fire that went before the people of Israel at night and the cloud that went before them during the day, which indicated the presence of God during their wilderness wanderings. And later they worshiped in the marvelously adorned temple that Solomon built. They had a sense of the majesty and the beauty of God in worship. We have the same opportunities: to write the praise of God in song and sing it, and to behold the Lord in the heavens and realize that he is declaring his beauty everywhere we turn, in people and in nature. We can have our souls made grand by the beauty of the Lord.

Lastly, the Jews had the honor of being the family of Messiah, the one whom God would send as the answer. They were the family who would welcome him into the world. And as Christians we are the family he has taken with him; we are his brothers and sisters. We have that honor as well.

Security, insight, beauty, and honor were privileges that the Jews squandered. Just because God had been good did not mean that they had no more response to make. The day broke finally when the Lord himself came to his people, and they rejected him despite all the opportunities they had to be prepared to receive him. Their rejection must serve as a warning to us. We are people of privilege as well, with all the advantages of church and family, truth, music, and insight; and given an opportunity tomorrow we could turn our back on them completely. Having been raised with every advantage, we cannot predict that we will choose the right thing.

I came to Stanford as a freshman in the fall of 1967, and a fellow I knew who came from a high school near mine ended up living down the hall from me. He was a transcendent figure even among a lot of other bright and talented people. He was athletic, good-looking, charming, and brilliant. He came from a prominent family in southern California and had a strong religious heritage. He was a privileged person.

But the last I heard, this man was living under a bridge somewhere in Los Angeles County. Everything he owns is in a shopping cart that he pushes around. The only time his talents as a leader and thinker are put to use is when he occasionally rallies other homeless people to shout rebellion and frustration at city hall officials and others. Humanly speaking, he had all of the privileges of the world, but for reasons that are beyond me he decided to junk them.

Having been given a great deal does not predict that we will have a great deal more. We find that we still have to make choices spiritually with what we have been given. The word of God has not failed because the Jews, with so much to their advantage, did not choose to follow Messiah.

## **How To Read A Family Tree**

The second idea about the Jews that Paul addresses in this section in verses 6-13 is to talk about their foolish interpretation of history:

It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls---she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

What the Jews were doing was looking back on their history and making the assumption that if they could trace their parentage back to Israel (Jacob), Isaac, and Abraham, then they could presume on the physical descent; they were owed something by God. But Paul says, "Look at history again. Abraham had more than one child. Only one was a child by miracle, only one the child whom God invested himself in, upon whom was the promise of blessing. The issue is not just who your ancestors are. The question is also whether you have faith. Has God invested himself in you, and has there been a response to him in your heart?"

Look at this series of names and see if you know who these people are: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah. After Sarah died Abraham married a woman named Keturah, and these were their six sons. Ishmael was born before Isaac, these six men after Isaac. But only Isaac was the child of promise. Life comes from God by miracle, by his touching and awakening faith and the heart's responding in faith.

## **Rebekah's Sons**

Then the toughest question of all that Paul asks here is the question of the two sons of Isaac, who had the same father and the same mother, who were born at the same time. Yet (as Rebekah was told before they were born) before they had done anything one way or the other to indicate that one was more attractive or more godly than the other, God said, "This one is mine, and that one is not."

Here is an interesting article that appeared in the newspaper recently:

"I go zoom," was all the three-year-old boy had to say after grabbing his parents' car keys and taking a wild joy ride. Florida highway patrol troopers remained stumped as to how Mikey Sproul, who stands just 30 inches tall, was able to hit the gas pedal and maneuver at the same time. The toddler's steering was a bit suspect. He hit three cars in less than a half mile during the ride Friday, but no one was hurt, including him.

Mikey's trip started just after midnight, when as his parents slept he climbed their five-foot bedroom dresser and snatched the keys. Dressed in nothing but his underwear, he hopped into the 1979 Mercury and fired it up. While backing out of the driveway and shifting into drive, he hit two cars at an auto repair shop next door. After a spin through a convenience store parking lot he swerved onto busy US Highway 41. When Warren Wise saw the car coming toward him he pulled off the road into a ditch, but that didn't prevent a third collision. "It was like he made a sharp turn and ran right into me," Wise said. That's where the ride ended, but no charges were filed.

The race car world ought to be keeping track of this child. There is something amazing about him, and we can predict a remarkable future for him. In contrast, the point Paul is making is that before the child Jacob was born, before anyone had any reason to know anything about him, God chose him. It was not because that child was more attractive or stronger or greater, or had any more reason to presume on God. It was because of the sovereign determination of God.

We had a family reunion last weekend. There was a whole bunch of people at our house for forty-eight hours of lots of talking, eating, and hustle and bustle. My two-year-old niece and an eighty-eight-year-old great-aunt and everyone in between were there. It made me consider how we think about ourselves as families, and it reminded me of what Paul is saying here. We tend to look at the most successful people in the family and say, "That's really the type our family produces." But we leave aside the sister who is in rehabilitation or the uncle who is in jail. Those are aberrations; they don't really represent the real "us." The real representatives of a family are the people who do well and are attractive.

Paul is saying that we are not to read into family histories the ideas that all the members who did well indicate how terrific we are, that they make the case that we deserve everything we get, and that advantages come to us and must continue to come because of something that is special about us. Many of Abraham's children left the story. They became wild antagonists to the people of God. Esau's children became the nation Edom which betrayed Israel. Yet, in this family tree we see God's activity in choosing some for himself, giving them faith and encouraging them to life.

That ought to produce gratitude, not presumption. So Paul is trying to remind the Jews, "Don't just look at the special line and consider yourselves to have God indebted to you. There must be a response of gratitude and appreciation, not presumption on God." There must be a miracle for us to experience the life of faith in Christ. God has to change our hearts, and we have to allow the change to take place.

But that is really the good news, isn't it? If he were to love us not just because he chose to love us but because we were special, because we could claim a right to it, because we had been given privileges and deserved more, or because others in the line that we looked back to were treated graciously; that wouldn't require a miracle to take place in our hearts. But in fact his choosing is based only on him. We can't un-deserve his love because we never deserved it to begin with.

My friend who is living under a bridge in Los Angeles County might look at people around him and say, "Those poor souls never had a chance. They were beaten and abused and hurt and mistreated; that's why they are homeless and wretched." But if he were to think this way, he would have to admit, "I was given every chance. I'm here because I chose to be here; I made a wretched mess of things."

Yet the fact that privileges may be followed by bad choices does not even then disqualify us. We can't look at failure and inadequacies on our part and assume that God will not attend to us, because there was nothing attractive in us that won his love to us to begin with. We find in Scripture a seeking, choosing, and penetrating God. If he loves us and has awakened love in our hearts, then we don't need to fear that the word of God will fail. That is the great declaration of verse 6. God does keep his promises. The news is good, and it is not too good to be true. If we read Israel's history right, we realize that he never rejected his people; he is continuing to keep his promises. And there is a great day coming when the whole nation will come to faith again.

Finally, I would like to ask you to go back and re-examine the apostle Paul's description of himself in the first paragraph of this chapter. Look at the real grief he felt for people who had missed the Lord (verse 2,3). Look at the same time at the praise that he offered to God for his greatness (verse 5). In Romans 9-11 we face some very hard questions; if God is doing all this sovereign choosing, there are some pretty difficult implications. But I invite you to place yourself to the degree that you can in the shoes of the apostle Paul, and not ask the questions merely intellectually, but feel the sorrow he felt for those who don't know the Lord, and be sure of the praise of God that goes with it. If we can hold those two things together during this study, the philosophical and historical difficulties will strengthen us.

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