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Q&A#120 What Does Romans 8-11 Teach About Election?

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Today's question: "What is your position on predestination? In particular, how should we understand predestination in Romans 8-11 with its many OT references?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is your position on predestination? In particular, how should we understand predestination in Romans 8-11 with its many Old Testament references? Well, perhaps that isn't a bad place to start, with the many Old Testament references. Paul is not giving here an abstract doctrine of election and predestination.

Rather, he's talking about a specific moment in history and the crisis that this occasions, the theological conundrum of Israel largely rejecting the Gospel and of the Gentiles flocking in and receiving it. And this presents deep theological problems and deep questions about soteriology, about salvation. It's not abstract soteriology.

It's not the general question of how are individuals saved. That's not the question at all. It's about how is God working things out in history? How is God forming a people in history? How does this comport with God's character? How does this fit in with his covenant purpose? And all these sorts of questions.

It's an extended theodicy, an extended justification of God's character and justice in this moment in time in Israel's history. And it's told against the background of the Old Testament, against the background of Old Testament themes. So as N.T. Wright has observed, if you look through the chapters five to eight slot, you'll see playing out an Exodus motif.

So it starts off with the theme of death and Adam and bondage to sin. And then you have coming to the waters of baptism and passing through the waters of baptism and crossing the sea and then meeting the law, receiving the law. And then the struggle within yourself over this law that brings death when it was supposed to bring life.

And the big question is how is the law that was supposed to bring life going to bring life when all it seems to do is bring condemnation and death? And in chapter eight, it talks about the bringing of life by the law and how the law is by the spirit of God made powerful and it's able to bring new life. That the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. So the law's intent, the law's intent from the very beginning was to bring life and it couldn't do that because it was weak through the flesh.

But now because of the work of the spirit of God, we are brought into a new liberty and we can fulfill the law from the heart as the spirit circumcises the hearts of the people of God. And this involves a movement into new creation. And so we are led by the spirit into new creation.

It's a promised land theme, being led by the spirit, being led by the cloud and the pillar of fire and going into the promised land. And this is what the creation is groaning in its futility, is waiting for. Birth pangs waiting to be delivered of the children of God, the sons of God waiting to be revealed.

And Christ of course is the firstfruits. Christ is the older brother who has risen from the dead, who reveals the new creation life already at work. And as his people we are bound together with him in his destiny and will be raised up with him and already seated in heavenly places with him and in him.

Now when we read that we will see that this is not just a story about how individual Christians get saved. And when we read it that way we are bound to make all sorts of errors and find it very difficult to understand. But it is not about how individual Christians are saved primarily at all.

That's very much something that is secondary concern here. The real question is what is God doing at this moment in time? How is he fulfilling his purpose? How does this fit in with the covenant? What does it mean that Israel has largely rejected? How are we supposed to read this? What is the place of the Gentiles? Can they be true members of the covenant? Etc. etc.

etc. And then you have statements like the great predestination statements of chapter 8, 29 to 30 or 28 to 30. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.

For whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he predestined these he also called, whom he called these he also justified, and whom he justified these he also glorified. It's what many people would think of as the golden chain.

One thing to another, one after another. That predestination, calling, justification, glorification follow after each other like dominoes in a row. And there's no interruption to this pattern.

And the confidence that this gives us, that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. That Paul's exclamation that follows is one that's grounded upon the confidence of God's work in Jesus Christ and the surety of his actions towards us in Christ. Now when we look back through this chapter I think what we'll see is it's not primarily about a set of individuals, it's about a people that God is forming at this juncture in history.

That God is forming a people formed by the Spirit to live out the life and the reality that the law was always aimed towards but could never achieve. And this revelation of the sons of God is happening at this moment in time. We're already having this anticipation, we can feel as it were this wriggling within the womb of creation, that there is something in there and something that's about to come out.

And the first fruits of the Spirit, this first down payment, this guarantee of the life to come is being worked out in us. And this is something that is seen in the body of people that is the church. This new body of people is formed in a new way.

Now I don't believe this is primarily about a set of individuals. It's not a set of individuals, it's a body formed around Jesus Christ and those are different things. Israel for instance is not a set of individuals.

Israel is a polity, a people, it's a nation that's gathered around and gathered within a certain set of realities. The reality of the covenant, around the being the heirs of Abraham, around the reality of the tabernacle, around God's presence within their midst, all these sorts of things. That's what constitutes this is a people and as a people it has a

certain character that is not necessarily one that can be spoken of as being possessed by each individual in their own right.

Rather individuals possess this as they are part of the nation, as they participate in the root and the reality of the nation. Later on Paul will talk about the idea of Israel as an olive tree and to be part of that olive tree is to participate in all the blessings of that. Now it's not that the branches have in themselves all these properties, the point is that they participate in the root and the fatness of that reality.

Now getting into chapter 9 we see the Old Testament very much is at play again. What Paul is doing is retelling the story of Israel so that we can understand what is happening at this juncture in history. In the juncture of history following the Christ event, how do we understand that Israel has largely rejected whereas the Gentiles have accepted in large numbers the gospel? The problem is how do we account for this against the background of God's covenant purpose for his people of Israel? This would seem to be incongruous with God's intent to save his people.

It would seem to go against the purpose of the covenant but yet what Paul does is he goes back and he tells the story of Israel and he tells the story in a way that highlights for a number of reasons for instance that the Gentiles who had not been seeking God are fitting recipients of his mercy, that this is always how Israel was constituted by an act of pure grace not on the basis of anything that might mark them out as deserving recipients. Now that isn't just a matter of works, it could be a matter of ancestry, it could be a matter of some other sort of factor and so he retells the story. He tells the story, he's reading Genesis at this point and it goes on into Exodus and elsewhere but he retells the story in a way that shows that Israel was never established on the basis of its works, of its keeping of the law, of its being marked out as the people of the law.

What he's talking about here is not primarily earning salvation through merit although that's an implication of it that it cannot be through earning through merit. Rather it's anything that might mark you out as a fitting recipient of this, whether it's birth, being born to a particular father. Well Isaac was the one that God would call Abraham's seed through, not Israel, so it's not about birth.

What about the fact of works and the way that you are an observant keeper of the law? Well we see the story of Jacob and Esau. Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? And we see that God says Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated and even within the womb itself before any actions had been performed God chose Jacob over Esau and said the older shall serve the younger. And at each point in Israel's history Israel was constituted on the basis of grace, of divine election, of a divine election that was not conditioned upon anything that was done by the human actors.

Now as we read through the story of Genesis we should recognise this, that this is what we see in the story. Why did God choose Isaac rather than Ishmael? Not on the basis of

anything that either of them did, rather it was divine purpose, it was divine election. It wasn't choice, it wasn't the choice of the participants involved, it was God.

Likewise when we read, as we're studying at the moment in my series on the family of Abraham, when we read the story of Jacob and Esau we can often feel sorry for Esau to some extent. But why was Jacob chosen over Esau? Not because Jacob did anything that earned that, because the choice happened before either of them were born. Later on we'll see that that's, that choice reaffirmed and it's something that is manifest also in Esau's despising of the covenant, these sorts of things.

But that's not the basis for it, it's not that God saw Esau's wickedness and then decided to cut him off from the covenant. Rather God's purpose all the way along was that Jacob should be the one through whom the covenant line would be established. And so the very origins of Israel were established by an unconditioned action of divine, series of actions of divine grace.

God forms his people this way and notice the asymmetries as we go through this, that God, it's about God's positive action of grace. It's not that there's a symmetrical action of grace and a sort of anti-grace of violent rejection and reprobation and these sorts of things. There's not a double decree in a way that would make one decree symmetrical with the other.

The other thing to notice here is this is not about salvation, this is about God's covenant purpose of forming his people. In the new covenant we see that it's far more about salvation because it is the means by which God is blessing and bringing in all peoples. Whereas in the past this was restricted to Israel.

You did not have to be a member of Israel to be saved. There's no reason to believe that Ishmael was not saved, indeed there's reasons why we might think he was indeed saved. The point here is who is going to bear the covenant destiny, who's going to bear the covenant promise.

And God always formed his people through an act of unconditioned grace. And as we read through this story it continues, so it goes beyond Esau and Jacob and it goes into the story of the exodus. He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.

So then it is not of him who wills nor of him who runs but of God who shows mercy. Notice again there is an asymmetry here. It talks about God's choice of mercy, exercising of mercy and compassion.

It's not about God choosing to exercise a violent rejection of people. And the word for hated in the story of Esau, it needn't bear all that weight, the weight of violent rejection and animosity, although there will come in that element later on as the story develops

perhaps. But it just means I chose, I preferred Jacob over Esau in the sense that I chose him rather than Esau.

And we see the same thing with the story of Rachel and Leah, that Leah is hated in one sense and Rachel is loved. That doesn't mean that Leah is violently and viscerally disliked. It might involve a dislike but that's not primarily what those words mean in that context.

And the point here then is that God is acting through this unconditioned act of mercy upon people who are unworthy of it. And this may involve a sort of an infralapsarian assumption but what infralapsarians are getting at is right in the sense that there's nothing about the recipients. That it's not that the choice precedes the sin and the sin is the means for justifying people not being chosen or something like that.

Rather it's the fact that God's action always, God's action in grace is always to unworthy recipients. That is the case that there's no need for God to justify himself in this way. God is not in the position of having to justify himself.

Rather he's exercising pure grace, unconditioned grace, undeserved favour towards people who none of whom are worthy recipients and all of whom are formed as a people. And remember this is the formation of a people not just the choice of detached individuals. Abraham, Esau, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael, these are not just odd individuals who happen to be believers or unbelievers.

No, these are the people through whom God was shaping at its very origins his people. And so the choice of Isaac over Ishmael is not just the choice of an individual, it's the choice of a people. It's the choice of the descendants of Isaac rather than those of Ishmael.

In the same way with Esau and Jacob it's not that God is choosing this one individual over another individual, it's God choosing how is he going to form his people. What people is he going to create? And it's a moulding of a people. Notice also that this occurs while in the womb and this is not the same thing as an election in eternity past.

This is something people often think in terms of election in eternity past as if history were a grand printout of what existed upon God's eternal screen but that's not the way it's described. And thinking about things that way will tie our heads in knots and it will tend to do violence to the biblical narrative. So it's not helpful to think that way.

We do have God's determination before creation to form a people in his son but that's not the same thing as choosing each and every individual and saying this set of detached individuals are all going to be elected in my son. That's not what we see in scripture and even in places like Ephesians 1 that's not what we see. It's not what we see anywhere in scripture and yet this is a common position and is often seen as the

Calvinist position.

It's not helpful and it leads to confusion about what the biblical text is meaning in such places. And this is not a reading of this text that's a sort of anti-Calvinist reading. I got this reading primarily originally from Herman Ridderbos who is a reformed commentator, one of the most famous conservative reform commentators upon this passage.

So it's not that this is some strange teaching that isn't reformed in any respect at all. No, the point is not about some eternal election before time began. The point is not to deny a number of things that are key in reformed theology.

It's not to deny the unconditioned character of God's grace. In fact, that's exactly what this is intended to affirm. Nor is it intended to deny God's sovereignty.

Again, we see God's sovereignty throughout this passage but this is not a sovereignty that is a matter of eternal determination. Rather it's God's sovereignty exercised in history, in the events of history and that's why it's retelling the story of Genesis and Exodus. And in the story of Exodus, it talks about Pharaoh.

Even the scripture says this to Pharaoh, even for the same purpose I have raised you up that I might show my power in you and that my name might be declared in all the earth. Now I mentioned earlier the significance of choosing people in the womb rather than in eternity past. Why might that be significant? Because the person in the womb is not just a blank slate, a non-entity, some sort of figment of God's imagination.

Now of course that's a way of thinking, thinking about God having figments of his imagination is a gross anthropomorphism that will lead to all sorts of confusions. But this is precisely how some people think and it does lead to confusions. Rather what we have is God choosing a particular person in a particular place within the womb.

They have not yet acted but they are a particular person, a particular lineage, a particular place and juncture in history. This is not the choice of some abstract individual that is then plumped into history. That's not how it works.

Rather we have the choice of an individual at a juncture in history and this particular individual is going to be the means through which God is going to achieve his purpose, through whom he is going to call his people. And in the same way with the story of Pharaoh, God raises Pharaoh up. He gives him, and this is not the same thing as God making Pharaoh sinful.

We for instance if we're reading the story of Job and Job is attacked by these people around him and all his people are killed and we have other disasters that befall him, it's not as if the people around him were very favourably inclined to Job and Job was in this situation where all his neighbours were praying for him and wishing him well and seeking his good and then suddenly they just turn on him. No, it says God had created a hedge

around and protected him etc. And in the same way when we think about someone being raised up or hardened, when we look in the story of Exodus we see that on the one hand God hardens and on the other hand Pharaoh hardens himself and this is a fitting way to see things that it's what recognises the integrity of secondary causation.

That God's causation is not in competition with human causation and particularly when it comes to sin, God is not the author of sin and when we read the story of Pharaoh, Pharaoh is hardening himself but as he hardens himself God is hardening him as well. That these things are not in competition with each other and Pharaoh is raised up in order to show God's glory, that God in the act of Exodus might achieve his, demonstrate his power over the false gods, over the rulers of the Egyptians and deliver his people from the house of bondage. And to do that he gives as it were free reign to the sin in Pharaoh's life and to the impact of that sin within his society, allows him to rise to a fuller stature in order that he might be broken down.

Therefore he has mercy on whom he wills and whom he wills he hardens. You will say to me then why does he still find fault for who has resisted his will? And then he responds with the idea of the potter and the clay. Now the potter and the clay again it's not that there is a blank slate, God creates a blank slate and then he writes on it whatever it will, whatever he wills.

The potter clay image is an image of movement between the potter and the clay. That God is shaping things, shaping real entities in history, real people and real people, people groups. So whether he's shaping Pharaoh as part of the Exodus, whether he's shaping his people through the choice of Isaac and the choice of Jacob over Esau, this is God forming his pottery as it were, forming his people over history and as he forms that people it's being made into a vessel for his glory.

And on the other hand we have vessels for honour and vessels for dishonour and the question is this sort of hypothetical question that Paul raises. He's not necessarily saying this is the case but it's a more hypothetical situation that may be the case. What if God wanting to show his wrath and make his power known endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy which he had prepared beforehand for glory even us whom he called not of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles.

What is he saying here? He's returning to the situation at this moment in time and raising a hypothetical question. What if God as in the situation of the Exodus with the design of saving and delivering his people is allowing the vessels of wrath and he's enduring with much long suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction that he might make known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy. Now recognise a number of things about this.

First of all the enduring the vessels of wrath is for the sake of the salvation of the vessels

of mercy. It's for the sake of grace that God endures with the vessels of wrath. Likewise God is not seen as preparing those to the same degree as the others.

They're hardened and they're hardened not necessarily through pure divine action upon them but they can be hardened through their own work as well and as we read this I think what we should see is this is against the background of unbelieving Israel and unbelieving Israel is rejecting the gospel. The question is what is the purpose of that unbelieving Israel is rejecting the gospel perhaps in order that God might demonstrate his power and we see that. What are they fitted for? They're fitted for destruction and ultimately that destruction comes in AD 70 as Israel is judged and Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed in God's judgment which I believe that the book of Revelation is talking about overwhelmingly and that event is the means by which God makes his power known and those vessels of wrath fitted for destruction are not about, again it's a historical account, this is not primarily about vessels of wrath from all eternity and then vessels fitted for wrath in hell.

There is that sense it shades off into that it involves that as well but the point is primarily in history that these are prepared in the historical events. These people have rejected Christ, they rejected Christ and his initial mission and now they've not just rejected the son of man, they've rejected the spirit given at Pentecost that bears witness to the risen Christ and so they have sinned not just against the son of man but also against the holy spirit and they will be destroyed and God is bearing with them with long suffering in order that he might save his people at this moment in time and that bearing with them with long suffering ultimately leads to bringing in many Jews and Gentiles and these are the people that God has called, this new people that are led by the spirit, the people that are spoken about in chapter 8 and then again he looks back at the of Hosea. Remnant and also calling a people from nothing.

What he's talking about is that this is the way that God has always done things. The way that God called and established his people at the beginning is the way that he's doing things now. God called Abraham as if from nothing.

God formed Isaac through bringing life to a dead womb and preparing Abraham to bear seed. Now this is not established on the basis of merit, on the basis of worth, on the basis of being a fitting recipient of God's mercy and so Israel that might protest at that time, well we have the temple, we practice circumcision and keep the law, we are people who are marked out by the covenant, we have all these covenant signs. That does not make them fitting recipients necessarily.

What it means is that we need to look back at the history of Israel. See that all are in this present moment in time, all are under sin and that God has formed his people from the very beginning through unconditioned acts of grace. Not based on the basis of birth and ancestry.

Ishmael had Abraham as his father too but he was not chosen. It's not on the basis of what you have done. In the case of Esau, Esau was he was not the chosen one from his very birth, from even within the womb.

It's not the basis of being greater or lesser. Esau was the older but he still was not chosen over the younger and as we look through again and again we're seeing this theme repeated that God chooses and establishes and forms his people through this sovereign work of grace. It's not on the basis of anything that these people might do to merit their status or their standing and at this moment in time just as we see in the story of Hosea, God is calling a people who are not a people who had been as it were not just cut off but had never been part of the people at all and as he's calling them they are as it were it's life not just life from the dead but life out of nothing.

It's something that is formed out of where there was nothing before and God is bringing this people in and on the other hand as in the case of Isaiah's reference God is also preserving a remnant of Israel. The 144,000, the people of Israel that are marked out and this is the gathering together of Israel that is going to be saved. Now this is something that raises deep questions.

What about God's purpose is expressed in grace and his choice of Abraham and his seed? This leads to questions not necessarily saying that Israel is deserving but what about God's purpose and commitment expressed in that original act of choosing Abraham and his seed? Has God reneged on his purpose? Has he just abandoned his plan for Israel? Has he just thrown Israel to one side and decided to just go with the Gentiles? And Paul answers that question in chapter 11 particularly and shows again that Israel's history has always been formed upon the election of grace that God chooses his people not on the basis of the mere fact of their ancestry, not on the basis of anything else like that or the basis of their works, rather it's on the basis of pure grace and he points out that first of all there remains a remnant that God has always preserved a remnant of his people. He looks back at the story of Elijah, Elijah and the remnant of Israel that Elijah laments the situation of Israel saying that he alone is left and God says I have preserved for myself 7,000 men who have not bowed the need to bail and at the same moment in time there is a remnant so what we're seeing here is not some sort of novelty. God is not acting in a way that he hasn't always acted in from the beginning.

God has always had a purpose for Israel. God has always intended to bring that purpose to completion and in the story of Elijah we see that even when it seems that Israel's history is at its lowest ebb, God still preserves a people for himself and he will use that remnant to build up his people. Now that may mean large numbers being cut off, the bulk of the people being cut off but that is understood in light of what we see more generally.

What we see more generally is that the whole history of Israel was founded not upon

ancestry, not upon birth or status or possession of the law, not upon any of those sorts of things but was ultimately founded upon God's choice and election of them as his people and that choice and election was always one that involved issues of choosing one over another. It always involved issues of forming his people sovereignly through history, raising certain people up, allowing certain people to rise up in order that they might be cut down to show his glory and also on the other hand showing mercy in an unconditioned way upon many in order that they might form his people and this is what God is doing in a more radical way as he brings in the Gentiles and makes them part of this olive tree. Now the root and the fatness of the olive tree is not found in Abraham as an individual, it's not that you're connected to Abraham primarily although we are children of Abraham but we're children of Abraham by grace because we are children of promise.

That's what we have in common with what we have connecting us to Abraham. We are children that are formed by divine grace and that's what connects us to Abraham not the fact that we are biological descendants or not of Abraham. That is not the point.

The root and fatness was always God's election of Israel, God's unconditioned election of his people and that occurred through things like the choice of Isaac over Ishmael, through Jacob over Esau and through his formation of people through history and that is what Israel finds its root in most purely. That's what connects them to Abraham, an unconditioned action of divine favour towards them. Now what does this mean for Israel at that moment in time? It means that Israel is most fully itself when it submits to this election of grace and when it turns to Christ in whom this has been fulfilled.

His point then here is not that Israel is somehow just is somehow irrelevant. Israel was formed on the basis of this divine act of grace and circumcision is indeed in sign of the righteousness of faith but the meaning of that was always found primarily in an unconditioned act of grace, not on the basis of something that would make you a worthy recipient which means that Israel needs to return to the root, draw from the root and to be cut off. They need to become more fully themselves, more fully Israel and that's turning to Christ.

It's turning to the one in whom that unconditioned nature of God's purpose, God's forming of his people through this gracious call. It's that in which we see God's ongoing purpose being taking place. This is the way God has always worked and it's the way God is working at this moment in time and indeed the calling of the Gentiles and the bringing in of this wider people and just having the small remnant left to Israel is not the end of the story for Paul.

It's something that is supposed to provoke Israel to jealousy, that they're supposed to see this situation and say we're being left out, we're on the outside and there's this great feast and this great enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant that were first given to

us and so we need to receive the blessings that truly belong to us. We are the natural branches and so as Paul says the natural branches can readily be grafted in again that they can receive what was always at the heart of Israel's identity if they turn to Christ and then at the end he ends with this very positive note that even the falling away of Israel is not for the sake of Israel's finally perishing but that the people might be saved and we see that in the story of Christ that Christ falls away not in order that he might finally die and that be the end of the story but in order that a multitude, countless multitude might be saved. Likewise with Israel.

Israel in the Messiah is supposed to die and rise again and as it rises again this brings the full richness, the full blessing of the covenant comes in as Israel is restored. This I believe then helps us to understand predestination and election in a far more biblical way, in a way that is rooted within the text. Now this does not mean that systematic theological understandings of predestination and election are wrong, it just means that they are not what the text is talking about and we need to be careful that we are not deriving from the text things that are abstracted from the wider context within which those texts operate.

As I've highlighted in Ephesians 1 for instance the context of that is the church at that moment in history and what tends to get lost in doctrines of election is first of all the juncture at which these events are taking place, that this is not just a timeless theory of salvation rather it's the account of what God is doing at this moment in time. What is the meaning of the church as a particular body of people? Israel was elected but now the church is the elect family of God and how do we relate those things? This election and how it relates to Christ's election before time began? These are the sorts of questions that need to be dealt with far more carefully by systematic theologians who are often in danger of abstracting these things from history and abstracting these things from God's formation of people groups through history. Rather it becomes about individuals and a set of individuals that need to be saved as a set but then just as detached individuals who at a later point are situated within history but that situation in history is fundamentally accidental, that is not what we see within Romans or within Pauline theology more generally and his doctrine of predestination and election is a deeply redemptive historical doctrine.

It's profoundly rooted in the events that are taking place through Christ and the work of the Spirit informing the church. Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow and if you have any questions following up from this or on any other subject please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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