

## Does God Keep His Promises (even 4000 year old ones?)

February 14, 2010 - Romans 9:1-29

Well, it's Valentine's Day. We have seen Valentine's decorations for a good month. You may have exchanged Valentines with the one you loved today. Or gave cards to friends. There can be lots of fun stuff with Valentines.

What thoughts does Valentines Day bring into your mind? I asked for your input and received several responses.

- *"I am a man, and as such do not 'feel' anything. Valentine's Day lightens my wallet a little bit. And it brings up lunch.*
- *"I think V Day is way over-rated and commercialized. However, it does make me stop and take stock of how blessed I am in my marriage.*

Valentines can bring reasons to celebrate. Those in marriages or relationships have another reason to enjoy each other. But others offered thoughtful cautions about Valentine's Day. One wrote:

- *It makes me feel sad, not for being single but for how commercialized love has become. Its sad to me that couples need a day to force them to be romantic and to share their love with one another. I don't think its very special to be receiving gifts on a certain day simply because the other party feels obligated.*
- *Another wrote - It makes me feel that we have too many commercialized holidays that used to mean something.*
- *"I also think VDay is way overrated. Its so focused on the chocolate, flowers, dinners, and diamonds that nobody can see past the materialism and look at what love is really all about.*
- *For me Valentines Day is a big let down.*

Well, whatever you think of Valentine's Day, it does raise the issue of love and loving relationships. So I asked another question. What are the top 3 components of a loving relationship? See if you can pick out some themes in these 6 responses:

- *Honest communication; Self Sacrifice; Based on Truth (Christ's truth)*
- *Trust, honesty, putting the other person's needs ahead of our own.*
- *Trust, communication and humility*
- *Collaboration, respect, and laughing together.*
- *Deep friendship, trust and intimacy."*
- *Trust, intimacy and grace.*

Did you notice a common theme there? Trust or honesty came up in 5 of the 6 responses. Trust is a vital component for any relationship to progress. One way you build trust or keep trust is by keeping promises. When a promise is kept, trust grows. Break a promise and trust suffers. Relationships that lack trust suffer a ball and chain existence. The question of trust hangs over everything. Will our trust be treasured or trashed? Broken promises weigh down relationships and can sometimes lead to the end of a relationship.

So if broken promises make a huge impact on human relationships imagine the potential impact if God broke His promises. If God doesn't keep one of His promises, how can we trust all of His promises? If we can't trust all, which ones can we trust? If God doesn't keep His Word our whole faith is blown. This church is based on a false premise. We've all got to find something else to do Sunday mornings and we've got to look elsewhere for satisfaction of our thirsty souls. Maybe something has happened in your life where you wonder about God's faithfulness. Or you wonder about God's promise keeping ability.

But I'm here to tell you today that **God keeps His promises (even 4000 year old ones) sometimes in ways we don't expect.** God is the ultimate promise keeper. But He sometimes surprises us in the way He keeps His promises. The Apostle Paul raises the question of God's promise keeping in the next section of Romans. If you were a Jew in Paul's day, you knew about all kinds of Old Testament promises to the nation of Israel.

They started with God's relationship to Abraham. We find a 4000 year old promise in Genesis 17:7-8 – The Lord says to Abraham – “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring after you. And I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.

Then in Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the Israelites of God's promises to them just before they go over to take the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 7:6 – For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

That sounds pretty wonderful; “Everlasting covenant; I will give you the land for an everlasting possession. God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession.” But look around in Paul’s day and the reality for Jewish people differed dramatically from these promises. Jews were scattered all around the world. Rome, a foreign power, occupied their homeland. It looked like the “treasured possession” status of the nation sure seemed in doubt. But more important, Paul observed that the vast majority of Jews he encountered rejected Jesus as their promised Messiah. If you looked at the early church you saw more and more Gentiles (non-Jews) coming in. From Romans we can conclude that the Gentile Christian population far outnumbered the Jewish Christians. So what happened to all of God’s promises from the Old Testament towards His chosen people? Did God keep His promises to them? Does He keep them to us? Today, I want you to see several ways God unexpectedly kept His promise to the Jewish nation. As we discover these ways, we will see glimpses of how God unexpectedly keeps His promises in our lives. My prayer is you will see God’s promise keeping in a new light today. Then we’ll consider responses to God’s surprising ways of promise keeping. Romans 9 is our text and I’ll be referring to it throughout the message. The 4000 year old promise - God set apart the descendants of Abraham to be His chosen people.

### **How did God unexpectedly keep this promise?**

**Instead of universal salvation, he saved only believing Jews. (9:1-6)** God fulfilled His promise to Abraham by saving only those who believed in Him, not all who descended from Abraham.

9:1 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—  
 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 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. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.

Paul expresses his heart cry for his own people. He was a Jew. He used to be high up in the Jewish religious leadership. But he sees his countrymen rejecting Jesus Messiah wherever he goes. So he mourns and sorrows over them. “I have sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart!” Perhaps some were accusing Paul of no longer caring about his countrymen. Or maybe some Gentile Christians talked down about the Jewish

Christians and their heritage. So he corrects that in verses 4-5 listing all the benefits and blessings they received through their history.

Then in verse 6, Paul explains God's surprising way of keeping the promise. "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." What does that mean? A Jewish ethnicity or being born into a Jewish family did not guarantee spiritual salvation. Not all who descend from Israel (the ethnic nation) belong to Israel (the believing children of God). God's choosing of Israel as a nation did not mean that every individual member of that nation would believe. So Paul says God kept His promise to Israel by saving believing Jews from within the Jewish nation. But how was this accomplished? God fulfilled His promise to Abraham in another surprising way.

### **He delivered on His promise through His election instead of their bloodline. (9:7-13)**

God fulfilled this promise through something called election. This was not the election by the people about God. This was God's election of people from within Israel. Verses 7-13.

7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. 9 For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son." 10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11 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— 12 she was told, "The older will serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

What is election? An act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved because of his sovereign good pleasure. Election means selection or choosing like we do when we go into a voting booth. Paul provides examples of God's electing work within Abraham's family. God chose Isaac over Ishmael. Remember the promise to Abraham that we looked at earlier? "Out of you will come a great nation and descendents." But it had been many years since God made that promise and Abraham had no kids through his wife Sarah. So Sarah decides they've waited long enough.

She and Abraham agree to a plan. She will give her servant Hagar to Abraham. Through Hagar, Abraham would have a son that would become the child of the inheritance. This was not God's way and led to all sorts of problems. 13 years later God visits Abraham to announce he will have a son through Sarah. That's

what Romans 9:9 refers to. Miraculously, Isaac is born to 100 year old Abraham and 91 year old Sarah.

Through Isaac, Abraham's offspring would be named.

Then Paul gives another example. Isaac's wife Rebecca becomes pregnant with twins. The Lord told her *before they were born* that the older would serve the younger. The line of Israel would come through the younger twin. The twins arrive; Esau then Jacob. Jacob is a deceiver. He steals his brother's inheritance by deceiving his blind father, Isaac. He certainly didn't deserve to inherit the birthright by his behavior. Eventually Jacob leaves and marries two wives. They and their maidservants provide 12 sons. Those twelve sons become the 12 tribes of Israel. Esau marries and also has children. His descendants become the nation of Edom. But it is through Jacob that the ethnic nation of Israel came into being. So Paul's point is that God has always kept His promise to Abraham by selecting some out of the many.

People may have expected that God's promise meant that every Israelite of all time would be God's treasured possession. And they may have expected that Abraham's descendants would inherit and own the Promised Land all the time. But the way God fulfilled the promise clarified the meaning of the promise. He did not violate it but fulfilled it in an unexpected way.

But here Paul stops his section on God's keeping His promise about Israel. He knows he's stated something that would raise objections. We've seen him stop before in Romans to address those objections. If you've never heard about God's election before, you probably have the same question or objection. How can this be fair? How is it fair that Isaac was chosen over Ishmael? How is it fair that Jacob was chosen over Esau before they were even born?

The next section provides another way God kept His promise in an unexpected way.

**God delivered on His promise through election without compromising fairness. (9:14-18)** God fulfilled this promise through election without compromising justice (9:14-18)

14 What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Paul goes back to the account of the Exodus. Remember Prince of Egypt or the 10 commandments with Charlton Heston for some of you more mature folks? Moses goes back to Egypt to free his people from Pharaohs' slavery. Pharaoh refuses. So the Lord sends the plagues. He starts by turning the river Nile to blood. Then there are frogs, gnats, flies and the death of livestock. Boils, hail and locusts afflict the Egyptians. Finally the plagues of darkness and death of all firstborn children lead to Israel's release. Pharaoh's hard heart refuses Moses' request in the early plagues. But as they intensify, God hardens Pharaoh's heart to accomplish His ultimate purposes.

Paul claims there is no unfairness or injustice in this. Romans 9:14 – “Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!” No there's no injustice in this – God has mercy on whom he will have mercy. God hardens whom He will harden. This is completely just when God looks at it from His eternal perspective. But Paul recognizes that to the human mind there still appears to be injustice.

So he raises the next natural objection. Paul's answer to this objection reveals another way God unexpectedly keeps His promises.

**God keeps His promise in a way beyond our capacity of complete understanding. (9:19-24).** God fulfills His promise through election without compromising justice in a way we can't fully understand.

Verses 19-24.

19 You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” 20 But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? 22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— 24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

Now I was talking with some different people about this passage this week. One said Romans 9:20 is one of the biggest cop outs in the New Testament. “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God.” It seems like the ultimate “Because I said so!”

A couple of possibilities exist here. One is that Paul may be responding to someone who questions in a rebellious way. So he could be saying “who are you O rebellious man to talk back to God?” Believing people like Job questioned God from faith. But Paul may be warning those who question from an accusing position.

Or he may simply declare God has this right to sovereignly choose. He does not compromise His character or justice in doing so. We are called to admit there are times we don't understand everything about God.

This doctrine of God's election and human choices has perplexed Christians for 2000 years. I would say that I started to seriously look at this 15 years ago. I don't have it totally resolved. No one can completely resolve it. So if you're just hearing about this for the first time today, don't beat yourself up if you can't put it together by 2 this afternoon. Our call is to recognize the Bible teaches both God's election and human responsibility. So yes we struggle to understand these truths. We must humbly recognize that somehow God makes them work without compromising fairness or justice.

A preacher named Charles Simeon of Cambridge ministered during a time (1850's) of great controversy over the doctrine of election. In defense of his commitment to both election and individual freedom, Simeon would sometimes borrow an illustration from the industrial revolution: "As wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet serve a common end, so may truths apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each other, and equally serve the purposes of God in the accomplishment of man's salvation." (Quoted in *Encountering the Gospel's Power*, Romans, John Stott Bible Studies).

The rest of this passage contains some deep treasures that we don't have time to get into today. We may return to them when we come back to Romans after Easter. But for today let's summarize what Paul has said about God:

- God's word has not failed. He's kept His promise to the Jews but in an expected way. – 9:6.
- God's purpose in election stands. – 9:11
- God maintains His justice when He elects – 9:14
- God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. – 9:18
- God is the Sovereign Ruler who makes decisions that we cannot understand. 9:19-20.

God keeps His promises sometimes in ways that surprise us. Now how might we respond today to what God says here?

## How might we respond?

*Recognize that God may be keeping promises in your life in ways you don't expect.*

Romans 8:28 – And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him; those called according to His purpose – That good work may take years to see; we may not see the good until we're in heaven. Look at Joni Eareckson's life. What good came out of her diving accident that left her without the use of her legs or hands at the age of 17? She states it led to a deeper fellowship with Christ; an investment in the lives of others.

What good came out of Corrie Ten Boom's time in the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp where her sister died? A ministry of hope throughout the world; millions touched and turned to Christ through her story.

In Hebrews 13:5-6 we hear the Lord say “never will I forsake you. Never will I leave.” But there were times Job felt alone. God allowed a time of silence as Job worked through his suffering. But that didn't mean God had forsaken. We might think that never leaving or forsaking means a warm, fuzzy, close feeling to Our Father all the time. But sometimes He's silent. That doesn't mean He's forsaken. It doesn't mean He's not listening. It might mean He wants us to dig deeper to search for what He's already said or continue to trust Him even though we don't have all the answers.

Proverbs 3:5-6 – “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make straight your paths.” But it might take time to straighten the path; it might take time to discover what wisdom looks like in a certain situation. It might be that God waits for us to acknowledge Him in all our ways – or He waits for us to stop leaning on our own understanding in that particular area.

Philippians 4:13 – I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. – The strengthening might take time; we might not be doing the right things. So he waits until we get to the right things. Philippians 4:19 – “And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory.” Great, but notice He promises to supply all our needs, not all we want.

God keeps His promises sometimes in ways we don't expect. So even if we don't understand what's happening, don't conclude God has abandoned you.

Let us *do a heart check on our attitude towards lost people in our lives*. Is there sorrow and unceasing anguish in our hearts for our unbelieving neighbors, family members, friends and co-workers?

*Praise God for His electing work on your behalf* and rejoice in your salvation! Remember Romans 8:29 – For those he foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the likeness of God’s Son. God was at work before creation on behalf of our salvation.

*Examine if you feel justified in rendering judgment on God*. Judging God is common practice today. North Americans and people with a western worldview regularly say no to any authority over us. We suspiciously question; We feel justified in judging God. But this passage alerts us to the reality that if we think we can stand in judgment over God, we’ve got things backwards.

**Introduce Jesus to your Jewish friends.** If you’ve got Jewish friends, have you ever asked them what they think about Jesus?

**Keep trusting God and His promises even if He keeps them in ways you don’t expect.**

If you are not a Christian – God’s universal call goes out to you to turn to Christ. This passage emphasizes that a Christian heritage does not automatically punch your card to heaven. Growing up in a Christian family or going to church does not mean you’re a Christian. Ethnic Jews are not all Messiah believing Jews. Churchgoer does not automatically mean Christian. So heed this wake up call. And come to Christ.

Valentines Day can give us reasons to celebrate or to wonder. It can remind us of strong love or of broken promises. But let this Valentine Day remind you of our surprising Promise-Keeping God. Now we turn to the Lord’s Table where we encounter our Love God.