Romans 9:1-13

The book of Romans is one of the most systematic book in the New Testament. It is the longest of letter and though it is addressed to a particular region like the other letters of Paul, the contents well summarizes the Christian faith so that it's not just addressed to a particular situation or a problem of a particular congregation. And here at the end of chapter 8, Paul concludes that the righteousness of God is obtained through faith in Christ Jesus, so that we are more than conquerors because nothing can now separate us from his love. This is really one of the result of the theme in this epistle which he states at the very beginning in chapter 1: the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, Jews first, then also the gentiles. It is the power to save and bring us to God with life everlasting.

Yet with this great conclusion, one question still remains concerning salvation, that is, what about the Jews? It is clear that by this time when the letter was written (probably around 55 AD), many Jews have already rejected the gospel. And so Paul would then spend 3 chapters explaining this apparent contradiction. If the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, first to the Jews, then also to the gentiles, then why do they reject it? Indeed, they had everything from God and with God. The list in verse 4 and 5 is impressive. Their entire history at least up to the New Testament era is tightly and directly connected to God. They were the chosen people, they had the covenant with God, they have the law of God, the true worship of God. And it was through their forefathers that the promise was given and carried, and indeed, the savior of the whole world is a Jew. What other nations in the whole world could claim any one of these? Surely they would be the last ones to reject God and his chosen messiah, if at all, yet they are the very first ones to do so. Jesus was sent to his own people but they did not receive him (Jn1:11).

Our immediate conclusion is that God's word and the power of the gospel somehow was ineffective for the Jews, and so it failed, which Paul quickly tells us that the word of God has not failed. And if you read on with the rest of chapter 9, you will get the impression that it was God's will that they should fall away from the faith, as Paul quotes from Malachi, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." And hearing this, a horrifying question may arise in our hearts: Am I loved or am I hated by God. How can I know? Indeed, many christians struggle with this question to the grave, a most unfortunate state to die in. They will always wonder whether they are really loved by God or not.

But here we must make a very important distinction between selection and election, without which, we will be locked into this eternal dilemma and confusion. Selection is God's choosing within human history so as to accomplish his will for the salvation of mankind. Paul actually uses pharaoh as an example of this. If God had not chosen pharaoh to be the bad guy in the story of the Exodus, then there would be no 10 plagues, no Passover, no crossing of the Red Sea, which were there not only to display God's power and glory, but these things pointed forward to that one Passover lamb, and the one washing of grace in baptism. Indeed, in all these, God has chosen pharaoh to accomplish all these, but it does NOT say that God also chose pharaoh to go to hell. God did not damn pharaoh to hell, but rather, chose him for this evil task. And one must also remember that it was pharaoh who hardened his heart first, and then God used his hardened heart to save his people. Pharaoh could, in the end, still repent and believe and be saved. And so in the same way, the rejection of the gospel by the Jews has its purpose, which Paul will explain in chapter 11.

Election, on the other hand, is God's choosing from before the foundation of the world to eternal glory in Jesus. It is God's choice that we are saved, but note that nowhere does it say that God chooses people to hell. Indeed, he chose certain people for some unfavorable or undesirable positions to accomplish his plans, but he does not choose any one to hell. In fact it is God's will that all men be saved (1Tim2:4) and indeed, Jesus came to die for the whole world, not some or part of the population (Jn3:16).

And so Paul asserts that the gospel has not failed because not all Israel belong to Israel, or in other words, not all physical Israelites belong to the spiritual Israel. It is not according to the flesh, but according to the promise. And so the question that we should ask is NOT whether we are the loved ones or whether we are hated ones, but the real question is how does God choose in the first place? How did he choose before he created anything? Was there anything to choose at all? There was really just one choice, his own son, the true son, who needed no adoption. The one who is the glory of God, not just a received glory. The one who gives and keeps the covenant. The one who gave the law and also the one who keeps it for us. The one who is worshipped, the lord of Sabbath. The one who also gave and fulfills his promises. The one who is even before Abraham. The one whom we call the Christ, the chosen one. He is everything that Israel should have but unable to believe and keep. He is everything that is described in verse 4 and 5 here, but he is more for he is the true Israel, one who is truly after God's heart, one who truly keeps God's law and covenants, one who truly follow God in all his ways, one who loves God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength.

This is the one whom God has chosen from the beginning, not chosen as one who would come to save, but chosen to be his beloved son in whom he is well pleased. And so if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away and the new has come (2Cor5:17). If anyone is in Christ, he is then part of Israel. It's like if God were to say that he has chosen bus #75, which is just outside of the Sherbourne station next to our church, that he has chosen this bus to be the heavenly bus, then anyone in this bus will get to heaven. This of course would seem absurd because the vehicle to heaven is not a "thing", but a person and he has come down from heaven to carry us home.

And the final remaining question is then "how do I enter this person so that I can be chosen?" Of course it's not like a bus, with a door where we enter spatially, but interestingly, Jesus himself calls himself the gate through which we enter to eternal life (Jn10), and Paul too often uses the term "in Christ". But the place where we can definitely say that we have been incorporated into Christ is baptism as Paul writes in Galatians: For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal3:27). The image there is like putting on a robe that covers you from top to bottom, so in a way, you are inside this robe. In the same way, baptism has that function and effect of putting you inside Christ so as to be united with him in death and resurrection. And that's really what counts, the true Israel's sacrifice for your sins, his death and resurrection, which are offered and given through the simple water of baptism. For the power of baptism is not in the water, but in the word, the promises, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. It is these words "I baptize you IN the name of the father, son, and Holy Spirit, I wash you of all your sins, I bring you into myself", these words that counts us as part of Israel. That's why in the next chapter Paul explains that it is the word of Christ that brings faith, so that we may believe and receive these to our benefit. And you hear them when you were first baptized, when you hear them every week when the Trinity is called.

The word of God has not failed, for it calls and gathers all to be in Christ, so that we are all chosen in Christ. This is where you find the assurance, comfort, and certainty of your election to eternal life, it is only in Jesus. In him you are chosen, in him you are the beloved son, in him you have glory, in him you have the righteousness, the covenant, and the promise. In him, you are sons of Abraham, children of the promise. This is the gospel, the power of God unto salvation, and it has reached our ears and has produced faith in us. This gospel continues to call and gather all others into this holy nation, even the Jews and all people alike. And so we pray that God would send forth his word so that all may hear and believe.