

God's Purpose

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 March 2011

Preacher: Rev. Jim Salladin

[0 : 0 0] Looking at the first 13 verses there, I have a little boy, and he is about 21 months old, and nearing two, not quite there yet, but one of the things that we all know about kids is that when you're a child, intuitively, you think that the world revolves around you.

So when you're a kid, you think that your mother exists exclusively to serve you. And many of us never grow out of that.

And you think that you want everything to happen exactly when you think it should happen, and the way you think it should happen, and if things don't happen that way, by the time you're two years old, you are very skilled at expressing your displeasure in such a way that for a very short amount of time, the world does, in fact, seem to revolve around you.

And it's entirely developmentally appropriate, or so I'm told, for that to be the case. But we also all know that part of growing up is realizing that you're not the center of the world, that the world is a lot bigger than you are, that you're a little piece of it, that the story of the world is not your story, that you're just a little piece of that bigger story.

Now I say that because reading the book of Romans is a lot like growing up. Because when we come to this text, when we come to the Bible generally, quite often, we come to the text thinking that it's going to be all about us.

[1 : 4 3] We come to the scriptures and to the book of Romans thinking, kind of placing ourself right in the center of the story.

And we think that, you know, the book of Romans is going to be a book that's all about me and how I get saved or what I need to do to please God or maybe how God can help me cope with life or something like that.

But the more we read Romans, the deeper you get into it, you realize that that's not the case. The more you read Romans, the more you realize that Romans is always pressing us out of the center and replacing us with God.

What we find out is that Romans is fundamentally a book about God. God is the center of absolutely everything in this book. We find out that salvation is about what God does.

It's not about what we do. It's about who God is, not fundamentally about who we are. The story of the universe is fundamentally a story about God and who he is and his purposes in the world.

[2 : 4 9] And it's not until we begin to see how God is the centerpiece of all things, it's not until we see that, that we really understand where we fit into the story.

It's not until we see that, that we begin to grow up as Christians. Now I'm saying all this because the text we're coming to this morning is one that is pushing us yet further out of the center so that God can be placed right in the center of it.

And for a lot of us, that's going to be uncomfortable. And as we come to this text, our task for the day is to look at the text and try to figure out what is God's overarching purpose.

What is God's objective? What is it that God is on about? And particularly, how does God achieve his purposes in the world in spite of massive human resistance?

I'll explain more of that as we go along. Let's get into the passage. What I want to do is I want to walk through the passage, show you three things about this passage, and then point out three implications.

[3 : 57] Okay, so first of all, three things from the text. There's a problem in this text, there's an observation, and there's an explanation. First of all, the problem. This is verses 1 through 5.

For the sake of time, I'm not going to read it, but let me give you the big picture. Over the last few weeks, we have been looking at Romans chapter 8. Not last week, but the week beforehand, we finished Romans 8.

And you'll remember that at the end of 8, Paul is at the absolute apex of exaltation. He's just ecstatic. Do you remember that? He says at the end of chapter 8, For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers.

Do you remember this? Nothing can separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus. But here's the thing. One verse later, just one verse later, in chapter 9, verse 1, Paul goes from the height of exaltation, and he just crashes.

He goes from the height to the depths of lament. He's in complete anguish. Why? Why is Paul in complete anguish? Here's the reason.

[5 : 09] Paul is absolutely devastated that so much of Israel has rejected Jesus. Paul is absolutely devastated that so much of his countrymen have rejected the Messiah.

And that brings up a massive problem for Paul, and it's a huge problem for us, too. Let me try to explain the problem. In the Old Testament, God had made wonderful promises to Israel.

Wonderful promise after promise after promise. And they all were to come to their fulfillment in the Messiah. When Jesus came, they were all supposed to come to fruition.

But now that the Messiah has come, it seems that the large majority of Israel, the people of God, it seems that they've rejected him. And if that's the case, here's the problem.

Does that mean that God's promises in the Old Testament have fallen through? Verse 6. Does it mean that God's word has failed? Does it mean that God's promises have failed?

[6 : 14] Think of the problem this way. Can human rejection and resistance thwart and derail God's purposes for the world?

Because if human rejection can thwart God's purposes for the world, then we have a very insecure God, and therefore we have a very insecure salvation. It's a really big problem.

Okay. Then Paul makes an observation. This is verses 6 through 8. Here's the observation Paul makes. He says, Well, this is a massive problem, and I'm in deep anguish.

At the same time, God's promises have not failed. Because in one way, we shouldn't be that surprised that a lot of Israel has rejected the Messiah.

Why? Why shouldn't we be surprised by that? Because according to Paul, if you look through the Old Testament, from the very beginning, there have always been some Israelites who have followed God, and there have been some Israelites who have resisted God.

[7 : 22] There have been some Israelites that over the course of their life, they proved to be truly part of God's spiritual family. But there were other Israelites all along who were ethnically part of Israel, but they weren't spiritually, deeply part of God's family.

And here's the thing that Paul's implying. He says, God never promised to save every single Israelite. He never promised that. What did he promise?

This is crucial. What is God's plan? What is his purpose? God promised in the Old Testament to save many, many Israelites. And he promised that through Israel, God would gather a worldwide family for himself, gathered around Jesus Christ, gathered around the Messiah, and that this family that God would gather would have representatives from every nation on earth.

And so the point here is, Paul says, God's word has not failed. God is doing exactly what he promised he would do. In Paul's day, and the same is true in our day, God is, in every generation, he's gathering a family around Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and it is composed of many, many Jews and many, many Gentiles.

Okay, that's the observation. And then thirdly, Paul pushes for a deeper explanation. This is verses 9 through 13. Now keep in mind the central thing.

[8 : 53] The central issue here is, has God's word failed? How can we be sure that God is going to accomplish what he says he will? How do we know that God's plan and purpose for the world is going to succeed? Here's Paul's final answer.

The decisive factor that guarantees that God's purposes are going to go forward in the world, the decisive factor that guarantees that God is going to succeed in gathering a people for himself, a family for himself, gathered around Jesus, is this.

God himself is absolutely determined to get it done. And the way God builds his family, the way God lives out that absolute determination to accomplish it, is that in every generation, God chooses to save many, many people and gather them into his family.

But at the same time, God does not choose to save every person. And God does not choose to gather every person into his family. God chooses to bring many people into his family, but at the same time, he also allows other people to reject him and to reject him eternally.

Let me illustrate this from the text. This is verses 10 through 12. Paul tells the story of Esau and Jacob. And Esau and Jacob were the grandchildren, do you remember this, in Genesis?

[10 : 17] Grandchildren of Abraham. God had made a big promise to Abraham. That is that, God promised that through Abraham's family, God would make a family for God. And Abraham had a son called Isaac.

Isaac had two boys, twins, Esau and Jacob. And before Esau and Jacob were born, God decided to spread his worldwide family through Jacob and not Esau.

God decided to gather Jacob into God's spiritual family and then use Jacob to spread his worldwide family. And he did not choose to do either of those things for Esau.

Now, we don't know exactly why God chose Jacob. It's not because he's the oldest. It's not because he had the birthright. He was the youngest of the two. It's certainly not because Jacob was a better man than Esau.

If you know the story at all, they're both kind of scoundrels. I think I like Esau better. Not sure what that means about me, but it's certainly not that Jacob was a better man.

[11 : 31] The only thing we know is what verse 11 tells us. It was in order at the very bottom of the column, in order that God's purpose of election may continue. What does that mean?

God was absolutely committed that his purposes for the world would continue, would go forward. God was committed to establishing a worldwide family gathered around Jesus Christ. And it was that commitment within God that moved him in a mysterious way that we don't entirely understand, but it moved God to love Jacob with a saving love and to desire to pour out his mercy upon Jacob.

Verse 13, as it is written, Jacob I loved. You know, if we ask that what, why did God choose Jacob, the best, deepest answer that we can give is that God is absolutely undeserved in showing, God shows absolute undeserved love towards Jacob.

but then, we need to finish the verse. And this is really hard and I know some of you are looking at it right now and thinking what could this possibly mean?

Verse 13 goes on, but Esau I hated. Now this is one of the hardest verses in the Bible. And there's not a lot that I'm going to say right now that's going to make us feel good about it.

[12 : 56] But I do need to say this, it does not mean that God in this kind of emotional way that's analogous to what you and I experience. It's not that God viscerally, emotionally, you know, hated Esau in the way that you and I experience it.

John 3.16 is very, very clear. We're going to read it later on in the liturgy. God so loved the world, the whole world, that he gave his only begotten son. Jesus, when he was on the cross, he loved his enemies when he asked the Father to forgive them.

What it does mean is that for reasons we don't entirely understand, God chose to allow Esau to reject him. Esau desired to reject God.

Esau did not want to be part of God's family. Esau sold away his birthright. And God, in a sense, ratified that decision, said, okay.

And that meant that Esau lived as God's enemy. There was hostility between them. And so far as we know, Esau remained outside God's family forever. Now, let me summarize some of this and bring it to us.

[14 : 09] God grows his family, according to Paul, the same way now that he did back then. In every generation, God chooses to save many, many people. And he chooses to save them not because they're good people.

Quite often, the people that God chooses are worse than average. That's nothing, no reflection upon us, I'm sure, right?

No, it's not because we're good. He chooses to save his people simply because he is good, because he is loving, because he is merciful. And when he chooses to save somebody, we learn this from Romans 5 to 8.

when God chooses to save somebody, he overcomes every obstacle. There's nothing that can stand in the way of him achieving his saving purposes. God never loses anybody.

But at the same time, in every generation, God allows some people to reject him. And when they reject him, God is ultimately allowing them to pursue the path they most desire.

[15 : 15] He allows them to live outside his presence and he allows that to go on for forever. Now, remember what I said at the beginning. We expect Romans is basically about us.

It's not. Romans is primarily about God. And this passage, fundamentally, is about how God presses forward his plan, his purposes in the world in spite of widespread human rejection, in spite of widespread human resistance.

The fact of the matter is God is powerful enough that even human rejection is not going to thwart his plan. There's nothing insecure about God and therefore nothing insecure about his salvation. But once we see that, it has implications for us.

Let me point out three. The first is this. This passage should press us forward in mission and evangelism. Why do I say that?

This is why I say that. The only reason and the only way that anybody could ever become a follower of Jesus is if God works this way. Why? Quite often, we talk about man's search for God or the idea that humanity is seeking after God.

[16 : 29] The reality is that that's not the case. Humanity is not searching after God. We're doing the opposite. Let me read you something from C.S. Lewis. This is something Lewis said about himself before he was converted.

Excuse me. He writes this. Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about, quote, man's search for God. To me, as I then was before conversion, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat.

Human beings naturally do not seek after God. We do the opposite. God must chase us down like a cat chases a mouse, like a hunter pursues prey.

And according to Romans, it's actually worse than that. It's not just that we do, we fail to actively pursue God. It's that we actively suppress the knowledge we have about God. Romans chapter 1 is very clear about this.

Human beings, naturally speaking, before grace breaks into our lives, whatever it is that we know about God, we want to suppress it and hide from it and run the other direction just like Esau.

[17 : 40] And friends, if that's the case, if we take Romans 1 seriously, then the only way anyone could ever know Christ is if God comes to us, if God intervenes in our hearts, if God chooses to break into us and change our desires so that instead of wanting to run away from God, we desire to turn and receive His mercy.

So that means that when you think about the world and when you think about your family, when you think about your children and your friends and your co-workers and your schoolmates, when you think about the people in this city that do not know Jesus, the only hope we have is that God sovereignly chooses to break into people's lives and bring them to Himself.

And that leads us to the second implication. This passage should move us in prayer. Let me show you a tension. A lot of you are already thinking about this tension. this passage teaches us that God chooses to save many people but not all people.

At the same time, we're going to see in Romans chapter 10 and we've seen in other places, God's offer of salvation in Christ goes out to everybody. The offer is extended to every single person.

Now, that creates a tension. How does that tension get resolved? It doesn't get resolved just by kind of rationalizing things. It gets resolved fundamentally on our knees.

[19 : 09] The tension is resolved in prayer. Why do I say that? Because when the Christian kneels down and prays, the Christian says, Father, I know that you are in control of all things.

And that the only way your plan will continue, the only way anyone could ever come to know you is if you break into people's lives. And I also know that you have offered salvation in Jesus Christ to every single person.

therefore, God, break into more lives. Save more people. Extend your kingdom in Vancouver and in my family and in my school and in my work among my friends.

I mean, do you see, did you catch Paul's anguish in Romans 9 in the beginning? I mean, he says, if it would do any good, I'd want to be cut off from Christ if it would mean that my brothers and sisters of Israel would come into the family.

he's in anguish, unceasing anguish, he says. What does he do with it? Turn over the page. Romans chapter 10, verse 1.

[20 : 10] He prays, brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. J.I. Packer in a book called Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, best book I've ever read on this, stuff, he writes this.

It is God's way, regularly, to withhold his blessings until his people begin to pray. You have not because you ask not. And then, when God does permit us to see conversions, we shall not be tempted to ascribe them to our own gifts or skill or wisdom or persuasiveness, but to God's work alone.

And so shall we know whom we ought to thank for them. So pray. Last thing. Third thing. This should move us to worship Jesus.

I said at the beginning, part of growing up as a Christian is realizing you're not the center of things. God is the center of things. And verse 5, Romans 9, verse 5, says that Jesus Christ himself is God over all, which means that Jesus Christ is himself the center of all things.

You can think of it this way. God's decisions in Christ are more decisive than anyone else's in the world.

[21 : 39] And when God decides to do something, when God promises something, there's no obstacle. Not even human rejection can ultimately stand in his way. And if you're a Christian, the more you look at God and the more you look at what all he has accomplished in Jesus Christ, the more you consider how God, you know, reached down into your life, broke into your life, grabbed you, rescued you, brought you safely into his family, the more you consider all that God decided to do in his son, Jesus Christ, and when you realize that it's not because you deserved it, but simply because he sovereignly loved you, the more you see that and the more that becomes the focus of your life, the more two things will happen.

you'll grow in two ways. The first thing is you'll realize how absolutely secure you are in Jesus. When God decided to draw you into his family, that settled the matter ultimately.

And nothing, nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. But the second thing that it'll do is it will cause you to desire to worship him, to worship Jesus, because you'll see that he is God over all and he is the center of everything.

You know, the greatest joy in the Christian life is to worship Jesus and to see his sovereign love, his sovereign power, brought together in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. When you see that, your heart melts in adoration and worship and you're motivated to go out and serve the Lord with everything inside you.

So let me close with this. For some of us here, Jesus is not the center of your life. You know that. And if that's you, let me just say, all this can be true for you today.

[23 : 33] Jesus wants to be the center of your life. Jesus wants to be the agenda setter for your life. And when he does become the center of your life, believe me, you will find no joy more pleasurable.

You will find no love more intense. You will find no mercy more undeserved. You will find no relationship more fulfilling than that which you will receive with Jesus Christ at the center of everything.

And it can all be yours today. God wants to draw you into his family. Don't reject him. Don't reject him. Receive him. Amen.