

Paul at the end of Romans chapter 8 is at one of the high points of the entire Bible. He's talking about how wonderful it is that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. He's on fire! He's full of praise and joy and wonder, caught up in how great all of this is. And how we can be confident for the future because we know that Jesus will never stop loving us. But now in our reading, not two verses later, Paul says that he has "great sorrow and unceasing anguish." Why has he come from all the way up on top in chapter 8 to all the way on the bottom in our reading for this evening?

It's because he's dealing with a very difficult question, one involving his own kinsman, Israelites. Why have so many of them not believed in Jesus? Why have so many of the people that God gave all of these promises to refused to believe in the one whom he has sent? And because of that question, there seems to be this conflict between what God promised to Israel long ago in the Old Testament and what's actually happening right now. Did he fail to keep those promises to his own people? Did God just forget about all the things that he said in the Old Testament and has just moved on to something else? Has God's Word failed to do what he said he was going to do?

And everything depends on that reality, Christians, because everything depends on God keeping his promises. If God made one promise that he didn't keep, one that he just decided to have nothing to do with, then we can't trust him at all. And if we can't trust God, we don't have any confidence. We don't have anything to look forward to. If God forgot to do those promises for Israel that he made in the Old Testament, how do we know he won't forget to do something for us as well? Everything depends on God keeping his promises. So we need an answer to this question: why did Israel not believe? Why did they refuse to follow Jesus? The answer to that question will show how God keeps his promises, even to us and even to Israel.

Because think about some of those promises that God made in the Old Testament. Take Deuteronomy chapter 7, verse 6, for example, which says this: "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." So in the Old Testament, there was only one nation that believed in God, one nation that was his people out of all of the nations of the world. God called them to be his own forever. And yet, at the time of the New Testament, so many of them refused to believe. And in fact they had become some of the very worst enemies of God's church. What happened to what God said to Israel in the book of Deuteronomy?

Or another example, Isaiah chapter 49, verse 15, which says: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." That's a beautiful promise that God made, that his love for his people is deeper than the love of a mother for her own child. He says that a mother would sooner forget that she even has children before God would forget his own people. And yet in the time of the New Testament, Israel seems to be forgotten, left out of the Church. What happened to what God said in the book of Isaiah?

Or one last example from Genesis chapter 12, verse 2. God says to Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." God promised that Abraham would have children more numerous than the stars of heaven and that through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed. That's a very great promise that

he made to Abraham. And yet in the time of Jesus, Israel turns away, and they want nothing to do with him. It doesn't seem like there's a blessing at all. What happened to what God said in the book of Genesis? It seems like his Word has failed. It seems like he promised something that did not come to pass.

And the reason why we might think that God's Word has failed, Christians, is because we often think that God made these promises to every single Israelite without exception. That being a blood relative of Abraham, his blood descendent was how they were part of the promise, and that God made these promises to each and every one of them. But God never made that kind of promise. God never promised that everyone who is physically descended from Abraham would be saved. He promised that everyone who believed in him just like Abraham would be saved. So in other words, there are two Israels at work here. One of them is physical, and the other is spiritual. And there's always been these two Israels, the physical and the spiritual. And just because you're part of one doesn't automatically mean you're part of the other one. Just because you are physically descended from Abraham doesn't mean that you spiritually belong to God. But that was the problem that they were struggling with, and the problem that we also often struggle with. We think that who we are physically makes a difference about who we are spiritually. That God considers who we are when he goes to save us. And because we do that, because we're tempted to do that, we often get distressed and upset when those two things are in conflict, when they seem to be going against each other. Because when we think that who we are physically has something to do with who we are spiritually, yeah, then it does seem like God's Word fails. It does seem like he doesn't keep his promises. But when we see that we are saved not because of who we are, but because of what God has done for us, then we will see that God's Word never fails.

Take this as an example to show you what I mean. There was a recent Gallup poll taken here in the United States back in May of this year, just a couple months ago. And in that poll, they found that 81% of people in America say that they believe in God. 81%. Now, that percentage is the lowest that that poll has ever had since they started asking this question back in 1944. And more than that too, its gone down 6% in just the past five years. Now, of course, the question is so vague that it includes everybody, whether they're Christian or not. And in fact, the percentage of Christians in America would be far lower than that, far lower than 81%. So I ask you: does that poll distress you? Does it upset you? And if it does, why? Because it often bothers us, I think, because we often assume that who we are physically has something to do with who we are spiritually. That we assume that being American means that we are also Christians. And so because of that, we think that everyone in America should be a believing Christian, simply by virtue of being an American. But the percentage of Christians keeps going down each year in America. And because of that, we come to the conclusion that the Church is somehow failing, that the Church is somehow failing as a whole all across the world, simply because of what we see happening here in the United States. Because we assume that who we are physically has something to do with who we are spiritually. And therefore, we ask: has God's Word failed? Has he failed to keep his promises to us?

But Christians, God's Word has not failed. God cannot lie. He cannot promise one thing and then do another. That's just not who he is. God always does what he says he's going to do. The promises he makes to us are certain, and the promises that he made to Israel back in the Old

Testament are just as certain. He didn't forget about them. He didn't just let them go. He kept them. He kept them because he made them to spiritual Israel, to those who believe in him. God never made the promise to everyone. God made the promise to those he called by faith to believe in him, those whom God chose for himself. And when we see that, we recognize that God's Word never fails.

And Paul makes this point when he says in our reading, verses 6 and 7: "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "through Isaac shall your offspring be named." So not everyone who is physically descended from Israel is part of spiritual Israel. And God proves that by quoting Genesis chapter 21, verse 12. Because when Abraham was in that chapter, he had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was the son of Hagar, and Isaac was the son of Sarah. So in other words, we have two sons with the same father, but two different mothers. And if being physically descended from Abraham was all that counted, being his blood relative was all that you needed, then Ishmael should've been part of the promise. Because he was just as much a son of Abraham as Isaac was. But Ishmael wasn't part of the promise. In fact, Ishmael in chapter 21 is driven out with his mother out into the wilderness, because the promise was made through Isaac. And God's Word did not fail when Ishmael was not the son of the promise, because the promise was always through Sarah. God promised in Genesis chapter 18, verse 10, that Sarah would have a son. Isaac was born even though Sarah couldn't have children. And so, God kept his promise, and God's Word did not fail.

But someone might say, of course, well, the problem was that Ishmael had the wrong mother. He's the son of an Egyptian. That's why he wasn't saved. If he'd been born of Sarah just like Isaac was, then sure. He would also be part of the promise. That was the issue. He had the wrong last name. But Paul shows that this isn't true either. He says in verse 10: "And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac." So Rebecca, Isaac's wife, had twin boys, Esau and Jacob. And these two boys had everything in common. They had the same father. They had the same mother. They had mostly the same genes. They even had the same birthday. There's nothing about these two boys that's different. And if who they were physically was all that mattered, then Esau should be just as much a part of the promise as Jacob is. But that's not what happened. Jacob was chosen, and Esau was not. Esau was not the son of the promise. The promise came through Jacob, because God chose him for himself and brought all of these things to pass. And God's Word does not fail.

Someone might still say, "Well, Jacob was chosen because he kept the Law. He did all the right things. See, Esau didn't keep the law. He did all the wrong things. That's why God didn't choose him. But Jacob did all the right things. So who you are may not matter so much, but maybe what you do makes the difference. That's why God chose Jacob." If you know anything about the history of Jacob, you know that wasn't true. Jacob was a cheat. Jacob was a liar and a thief. Hardly a saint. But Paul says it's even more than that, because he says in verse 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." So before these two boys had done anything, good or bad, before they were known for the kind of person they would be, God chose Jacob and not Esau. Because salvation does not depend on who we are.

God's promises do not depend on who we are. These things depend on God and his choice and his work alone. And God's Word does not fail.

So what does all of this mean for us then? What do we take away from this? It's to see that God's Word has indeed not failed us, Christians. God has kept his promises, and he will continue to keep his promises. And that's going to be true, no matter what. Because it doesn't depend on who we are. It depends on God who has chosen us for himself. And even if everything around us is going the way we think it shouldn't be, even if everything is utterly collapsing and the Church is far smaller than we think it should be, God's promises have not failed. The Church has not failed, because it depends on God and him alone. So we need not be distressed or upset at the way things are going. The Church is not failing, Christians. Because God's promises cannot fail. He can never go back on his Word, because they depend on him. And just as he did not break his promises to Israel, he will not break his promises to us, because he has made them through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are the one who has called us to yourself. Help us always to trust in you, knowing that your Word cannot fail, because you have made these promises to us in your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.