

• *Answer to the question 'Did God's purpose fail?'*

1. Faith cannot be inherited physically

• *The first generation were genuine believers*

2. Groups of spiritually 'saved' people divide into the nominal and the real in the second generation

• *There was always a difference between truly believing Israel and wider national Israel*

3. There are two meanings to the word 'Israel'

• *Not all are 'Israel' (God's truly saved people) who are from Israel (that is, from the earthly nation)*

Paul now introduces the first of the four answers he has concerning Israel. ⁶*Now it is not as though the word of God has fallen aside.* What about Israel? Did the purpose of God fail? No! The word of God has not fallen aside. *For not all are Israel who are from Israel . . .* This is the vital sentence of this chapter. What does it mean?

1. **Faith cannot be inherited physically.** At the time of the Exodus Israel became a **nation** of believers. They all had put their trust in the blood of the passover lamb and were famous for their faith. The entire nation gets mentioned in Hebrews 11:29 as amongst the heroes of faith.

But what about the second generation? The first generation was 'Israel' – a company of **believers**. But faith cannot be inherited nationally or corporately. So the Israel of the second generation does not have the same spiritual genuineness as the Israel of the first generation.

2. **Groups of spiritually 'saved' people divide into the nominal and the real in the second generation.** It is this principle that was operating in the people of Israel. The first generation were heroes of faith¹. By the second generation after leaving Egypt some Israelites were only Israelites by descent, by upbringing, by external religious observance, but not by the Holy Spirit working faith into their hearts. Has God's purpose and promise to Israel failed? No! Because not all are God's true people simply because they come from the nation of Israel. Salvation and inheritance are obtained through faith². Paul has said that justification cannot be lost. Those who are justified are glorified. But many Jews thought that salvation was guaranteed to **national** Israel, as if God's people are an earthly physical nation. Yet the 'seed of Abraham' is first and foremost a spiritual company of people. 'The seed' are all who have faith as Abraham had faith. It is all who have been brought into being as the people of God, chosen **for salvation**. It is **not** all who have been chosen for Israelite nationality. The 'word' of promised blessing seemed to have failed for the nation of Israel. But God keeps his promises completely. There was always a difference between truly believing Israel and the wider national Israel. God's purpose is fulfilled. Not all from the nation of Israel are God's true 'Israel'. Not all are 'spiritual' Israel just because they are 'Israel' by nationality. God's purpose is supremely for his 'spiritual' Israel. No one in **that** Israel has forfeited salvation.

3. **There are two meanings to the word 'Israel'.** It may refer to the nation (as in the second time 'Israel' comes in 9:6). It may refer to God's truly believing people (as in the first time the word 'Israel' is used in this verse). Not all are 'Israel' (God's truly saved people) who are from Israel (that is, from the earthly nation).

The phrase 'seed of Abraham' or 'children of Abraham' also may refer to physical descendants of Abraham¹, or to those who share Abraham's faith².

Paul now develops his point. Not all are God's true Israel who are from the nation of Israel: ⁷*neither are they all children – true spiritual children of Abraham – just because they are Abraham's seed, but 'In Isaac shall a seed be called to you.'*

¹ Hebrews 11:29

² 4:16

¹ see 11:1
² Galatians 3:29

- *Abraham's descendants
The descendants of Isaac, not Ishmael, were chosen to carry forward God's purpose of worldwide blessing*

- *Salvation is by 'calling' as the birth of Isaac illustrates*

- *Paul is dealing here with saving righteousness and why Israel never obtained justification*

4. God's promises carry their own power to be fulfilled

- *Predestination is unconditional, individual and to salvation*

- *A great mystery bringing unanswerable questions*

- *Ishmael was a child of the flesh and not chosen to bring Abraham's seed*

- *Isaac was a child of promise*

- *When God speaks a word that word*

Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. They were both his children by physical descent, but it did not mean that they were both his children in the sense of being chosen by God to carry forward God's purpose. Abraham's two physical and biological descendants are the 'children of Abraham' in that they carry his blood and his genes and many of his physical characteristics, but it does not mean that they both inherit his calling or his faith or his place in the purpose of God. God told Abraham, 'In Isaac shall a seed be called to you.' It was as if God said, 'I am not going to bring this seed and worldwide blessing through Ishmael, the son you already have. I am going to ignore him (in this respect) and bring into being a miracle-child as I promised. The promised worldwide blessing will come through the one I miraculously call into being.'

Paul is using the story of the birth of Isaac to illustrate how people become Christians. God called Isaac into being. Similarly salvation is by 'calling'. We are 'called into fellowship with his Son'¹. The translation is disputed. Is it 'through Isaac . . . offspring will be reckoned' (NIV)? Or 'In Isaac shall seed be named'? A better translation is, 'In Isaac a seed shall be called into being.' Remember Romans 4:17. God 'calls things that have no existence so that they come into existence', said Paul, referring to the birth of Isaac. Christian conversion is also by God's calling. Those he predestined he also called².

The calling into being of Isaac illustrates the calling into being of saved people as seed for Abraham. It is only an illustration. It is definitely salvation that Paul is dealing with in Romans 9. The starting point of the discussion is: why did not many Jews receive salvation at the time of the coming of Jesus? Why have gentiles received salvation in large numbers? Phrases like 'not by works'¹ are the very phrases Paul has used earlier with regard to salvation². Being 'prepared for glory' refers to final salvation. Romans 9–11 are about how one gets to saving righteousness³ and why Israel never obtained justification. Salvation comes by being 'chosen by grace'⁴.

4. **God's promises carry their own power to be fulfilled.** Paul uses Isaac and Ishmael to illustrate the point that God has always worked by a process of 'calling' into being those he wanted to save, and he has had a habit of leaving aside some of those who were Abraham's seed by nature. Ishmael was Abraham's seed by birth but did not receive a promise that the 'seed of Abraham' would come through him. Now in Paul's day, the Jews are Abraham's seed by nature but it is obvious that many are not Abraham's seed in the sense of having been called to salvation. The situation in Paul's day is parallel to the calling of Isaac, and the ignoring of Ishmael. The predestination mentioned here is **unconditional**. It is not predestination because of foreseen faith. It is also **individual** predestination and it is predestination to **salvation**. It is all a great mystery. We must be ready to refuse to be drawn into answering unanswerable questions.

So Paul continues: ⁸*That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but it is the children of the promise who are reckoned as being seed.* Ishmael was a child of the flesh and he was nothing more. Abraham took Hagar as a concubine or second wife. He got Ishmael born, but God was not working miraculously in that! God told Abraham, 'Your son Ishmael is not the one through whom this "seed" that I spoke about is going to come. The seed will come into being through Isaac.' Because of the advanced old age of Abraham and Sarah it seemed impossible this seed would be born.

¹ 1
Corinthians 1:9

² 8:30

¹ 9:12
² 3:28; 4:3-6

³ 9:30
⁴ 11:5


carries its own creative power and brings about its own fulfilment

• God leaves aside many of the natural seed and calls into being the seed of Abraham in the way He wants to

But God had promised it, and the promise carries within itself the power to be fulfilled. Isaac was a child of the promise, which means 'a child produced by the promise'. When God speaks a word, that word carries its own creative power and brings about its own fulfilment. The nation of Israel itself came into being through a process of God's leaving aside the person born to Abraham by physical descent, Ishmael, and instead 'calling' into being the one concerning whom he had given a promise. God had given a word to the effect that he was bringing into being a 'seed'. Part of that promise was that the nation of Israel would come into being. But the nation of Israel came into being through a process of ignoring the natural offspring of Abraham and calling Isaac into existence supernaturally.

Paul explains. ⁹For this was the word of promise, 'At this time I will come and Sarah will have a son.' There came a point where God told Abraham that Sarah would conceive immediately and would give birth the following year¹⁰. God called Isaac into being. He was born by grace, 'The Lord was gracious to Sarah . . . and the Lord did what he had promised'¹¹. So when Jesus came, Israel failed to believe. God decided to leave aside the natural seed and bring into being a spiritual 'seed' for Abraham in his own way. This is how salvation takes place. God leaves aside many of the natural seed and calls into being the seed of Abraham in the way he wants to.

10 Genesis 17:21;18:10
11 Genesis 21:1

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