

August 17
Lesson 11

LIVING UNDER GOD'S MERCY

DEVOTIONAL READING: James 5:7-12

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 9:6-29

ROMANS 9:6-18

⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ⁸ In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."



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¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! 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 It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. ¹⁷ For Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” ¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

KEY VERSE

Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. —Romans 9:18

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify “the children of the promise.”
2. Explain how “the children of the promise” receive their status.
3. Create a plan to be a spiritual mentor to one or two people whom he or she can help lead to Christ or help deepen their discipleship.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Hard, Hard Hearts
- B. Lesson Background: Promises to Israel
- C. Lesson Background: Readers in Rome

I. Children of the Promise (ROMANS 9:6-8)

- A. Not All Are of Israel (vv. 6, 7a)
- B. Not All Are of Isaac (vv. 7b, 8)

On Heritage

II. Two Sons Times Two (ROMANS 9:9-13)

- A. Sarah and Rebekah (vv. 9, 10)
- B. Esau and Jacob (vv. 11-13)

III. Mercy and Hardening (ROMANS 9:14-18)

- A. God Is Always Just (vv. 14, 15)
- B. God Is Always Sovereign (vv. 16-18)

Why We Praise

Conclusion

- A. Living the Life of Mercy
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Hard, Hard Hearts

What is a hard heart? When we apply this to personalities, we are looking at emotional conditions. In common parlance, hard-hearted persons are emotionally stunted and cold. They act only in self-interest and cannot empathize with others who might need their help. They are the Simon Legrees and Ebenezer Scrooges of literature.

This is not exactly what the Bible authors mean when they use the image of the hard heart. In the pages of the Bible, the heart is more than the emotional center of human personality. More fundamentally, the heart is the center of the will, of the decision-making process. When persons in the Bible are described as having a hard heart, they have a will that is turned against God. They deny his authority in their lives. They refuse to repent of sin. The hard-hearted person does not love God.

Such rebellion reveals itself in daily choices. If I hate God, will I love others? No. The two great commandments to love God and love others ([Matthew 22:36-40](#)) will more likely become *I hate God, so why not hate others?* The emotional companions of the hard heart are bitterness, impatience, and arrogance. We see these in abundance in today's world. Today's lesson teaches us about a different, better path.

B. Lesson Background: Promises to Israel

An important backdrop to [Romans 9](#) is the multi-generational saga that began with Abraham. It began in [Genesis 12:1-3](#), where God made certain promises to that patriarch. These promises included assurance that Abraham's descendants would become a great nation and a blessing to "all peoples on earth." *Generation one* featured Abraham, his wife Sarah, and handmaid Hagar.

Generation two featured Isaac (son of Abraham and Sarah) and Ishmael (son of Abraham and Hagar). Abraham later married another wife, Keturah, and had six sons by her ([Genesis 25:1, 2](#)), but these do not figure into Paul's discussion in [Romans 9](#).

Generation three spotlighted Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau. But God's promises were passed down only through Jacob. His name changed to *Israel* ([Genesis 32:28](#)), and the promises eventually extended to his 12 sons (by four women). The descendants of these 12 became the nation of Israel.

C. Lesson Background: Readers in Rome

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul discussed God's plan for the nation of Israel ([Romans 9:1-5](#)). This topic was important to that church, because it was made up of Christians of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, with apparent friction between the two groups (compare [11:13-24](#), lesson 12). One of the issues seems to have revolved around God's promises to the nation of Israel. Perhaps some Jewish Christians touted these promises arrogantly, making the Christians of Gentile background feel inferior and second class. A response from the Gentiles to this might have been that the promises to Israel were irrelevant because of Christ (see [lesson 12](#)).

Paul condoned neither position. He wanted the readers to know that things were not so simple. The apostle bared his heart to confess his agony over the unbelief of the majority of his fellow Jews regarding Jesus. Paul said he would be willing even to have God's curse fall upon him if they would come to faith ([Romans 9:3](#)). He assured his readers that Jews had many blessings and advantages, including the Law of Moses, worship at the temple, and the promises given to their ancestors ([9:4, 5a](#)). Most of all, the nation of Israel was blessed by being the source of the Messiah himself ([9:5b](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Abraham *Ay-bruh-ham.*

Edom *Ee-dum.*

Esau *Ee-saw.*

Hagar *Hay-gar.*

Idumea *Ih-dyuh-me-uh.*

Ishmael *Ish-may-el.*

Keturah *Keh-too-ruh.*

patriarch *pay-tree-ark.*

Pharaoh *Fair-o or Fay-roe.*

Sinai *Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.*

Paul was convinced that the promises given to Abraham (and therefore to Israel) had not come to an end. God still had a plan for the salvation of Israel. But before we address that in next week's lesson, Paul had some important preliminaries to establish.

I. Children of the Promise

([ROMANS 9:6-8](#))

A. Not All Are of Israel ([vv. 6, 7a](#))

6, 7a. It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.

Paul uses the phrases *God's word* and "the word of God" numerous times in his letters to refer to the message of the gospel (examples: [Colossians 1:25](#); [Titus 2:5](#)). Here, however, it is more likely that this phrase refers to the promises and privileges of Israel that he has just listed in [Romans 9:4, 5](#). Paul is beginning to reveal that the true community of believers (the church) supersedes and replaces any notion of the people of God as being merely the physical descendants of the man Abraham.

The apostle has already touched on this topic in [Romans 2:28, 29](#); [4:16, 17](#) (compare [Luke 3:8](#)). Here he probes deeper with a declaration that is difficult to understand: *not all who are descended from Israel are Israel*. How can anyone be "not-Israel" and "Israel" at the same time? [Verse 7a](#) clarifies: just being one of Abraham's *descendants* does not make a person one of his *children* (a spiritual offspring).

In other words, belonging to Israel in a physical sense is not the same thing as belonging to Israel in a spiritual sense. Having the DNA of Abraham in one's genes does not mean a person is a guaranteed heir to

the promises. Having the blood of Abraham coursing through one's veins does not automatically convey to such a person the faith of Abraham and his relationship with God. Further explanation follows.

B. Not All Are of Isaac (vv. 7b, 8)

7b, 8. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.

The fact that not every physical child of Abraham was his promised heir is evident within the pages of the Old Testament itself. Only Isaac was the child of promise, the son of faith ([Genesis 21:12](#)). Ishmael was Abraham’s son through the slave Hagar by an act of unbelief. Abraham and Sarah did not trust God’s promise of many descendants, so they cooked up a way to provide a son through their own actions ([Genesis 16:1-4](#)).

What Do You Think?

When are Christians most tempted to replace God's plan with one of their own? How have you seen such substitutions work out?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding lifestyle choices
- Regarding stewardship of resources
- Other

But God did not nullify his promise, despite Abraham and Sarah’s unfaithful act. In their old age, they received their promised son, Isaac ([Genesis 21:1-3](#)). Ishmael had the DNA of Abraham, but not God’s promise to that man. Through only one son did the promise flow, and that son was Isaac. Claiming Abraham as a physical ancestor does not make one his spiritual heir.

ON HERITAGE

Muslims and Jews share something in common: they both believe that they are the chosen people of God. Both acknowledge Abraham as their ancestral father. They have parallel stories involving identical characters, but with the outcomes switched: Muslims believe that Ishmael, not Isaac, was the chosen son. That is a primary point of doctrine where Islam and Judaism diverge.

As important as it is to get that doctrine right, Paul reminds us of something of greater importance: being in right standing with God is not a matter of biological connections or family trees (compare [Matthew 3:9](#)). Rather, it is a matter of the condition of one’s heart. Those who come to Christ in faith are the true children of Abraham (compare [Galatians 3:7](#)).

Let us also not fall into the trap of seeing our spiritual heritage (denominational identity, etc.) as a measure of our maturity in Christ or favor before God. Paul warned against devoting time to “endless genealogies” ([1 Timothy 1:4](#)), and the warning applies to spiritual heritage as well as to biological ancestries. We will be held accountable for our own motives and actions, no matter who our physical and spiritual ancestors were.—D. C. S.

What Do You Think?

What spiritual heritage should Christians leave?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

To their own children

To their children in the faith ([1 Timothy 1:2](#))

II. Two Sons Times Two

([ROMANS 9:9-13](#))

A. Sarah and Rebekah ([vv. 9, 10](#))

9. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”

Paul now shifts between persons. First, he reminds us of *how the promise was stated* when given by God ([Genesis 18:10, 14](#)). The promised son was Isaac, born in Abraham and Sarah’s old age ([17:17](#); [18:13](#); [21:5](#)). The birth of Isaac was understood by this couple as a fulfillment of God’s promise.

10. Not only that, but Rebekah’s children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac.

Paul moves to the next generation, the generation of Isaac and Rebekah. There are two sons at issue in this situation also, the twins Esau and Jacob. There are no competing mothers this time (contrast [Genesis 16:4-6](#)), only competing sons. One of these two was to be the heir of the promise to Abraham and to Isaac ([26:2-5](#)).

B. Esau and Jacob ([vv. 11-13](#))

11. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand:

Just as God’s primary promise was not extended to both Ishmael and Isaac, such was also the case for brothers Esau and Jacob. Paul does not explain why. Instead, he merely lays out a stark fact: God made a choice between those two before they were even born. God’s decision was made before they had proven themselves by doing *anything good or bad*. When it came to sin, neither son was more righteous than the other. Jacob took advantage to cheat Esau out of both his birthright and his father’s blessing ([Genesis 25:29-34](#)). Esau chose wives that grieved his parents ([26:34, 35](#)); he also plotted murder against Jacob ([27:41](#)).

What Do You Think?

Which most determines how a child will turn out: nature or nurture?

Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

What you have seen in favor of nature or heredity (what a person inherits genetically)

What you have seen in favor of nurture or environment (how a person is reared)

Regarding Bible examples of either

12a. not by works but by him who calls—

Paul stresses a vital point: God’s choice was not made on the basis of *works* on the part of either Jacob or Esau. This fact is applicable in two ways in the Roman situation that Paul is addressing. First, neither Jews nor Gentiles can earn God’s favor. He did not choose the nation of Israel for any reason other than his own purposes. His plan was for a certain nation to be the recipients of his divine law and to be the nation to usher in his promised Messiah. That nation came into being through the call of Jacob, not Esau ([Genesis 28:13-15](#)).

12b. she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”

Paul quotes a portion of [Genesis 25:23](#). That prophecy went against prevailing cultural norms, which dictated that the older son held the primary position as heir. (Compare God’s later declaration in [Deuteronomy 21:15-17](#).) Normally, this also should have been the case with twins Esau and Jacob, even if Esau was *the older* by no more than a few minutes.

This is an epic prophecy about much more than the sibling rivalry we read about in [Genesis 25:29-34; 27:1-41](#). These sons of Isaac became the patriarchal ancestors of two nations or peoples: those of Edom (of son Esau; [chap. 36](#)) and Israel (of son Jacob; [49:1-28](#)). Although blood kin, these two peoples ended up being in constant conflict ([Numbers 20:14-21](#); [1 Chronicles 18:12, 13](#); [2 Chronicles 21:8-10](#); etc.).

The rift between the people of Israel/Jacob and Edom/Esau never healed (see [Psalm 137:7](#); [Isaiah 34:5](#)). The reversal of Esau and Jacob’s positions regarding preeminence, astounding at the time, was in the deliberate plan of God.

13. Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Paul’s discussion to this point has been based on the book of Genesis. Now he fast-forwards more than 1,400 years to quote [Malachi 1:2, 3](#) to show the result of God’s promise being directed through Jacob rather than Esau. Malachi prophesied after some Jews had returned from Babylonian captivity to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. His prophecy pictured Edom as “a wasteland and left ... to the desert jackals” ([1:3](#)) and promised that God would never allow that nation to rebuild ([1:4](#)). This justifies Malachi’s historical verdict: God had loved Jacob (Israel) but hated Esau (Edom).

Although it took centuries for God’s promise to be fulfilled, it proved sure and trustworthy. In Paul’s day, Edom is called *Idumea* ([Mark 3:8](#)) and is but a shadow of its ancient self—further support for Paul’s illustration. God had chosen to favor Israel, even in the midst of Roman occupation, while Edom languished.

III. Mercy and Hardening

([ROMANS 9:14-18](#))

A. God Is Always Just ([vv. 14, 15](#))

14. What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!

Paul now pauses his history lesson to ask a difficult question: Does all this mean that God is unjust? This is unthinkable for Paul and is similar to his question in [Romans 6:1](#), “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” This is the *reduction to the absurd* argument, the answer to which is quite obvious. To charge God with being unjust or unrighteous is preposterous. God is the one who defines justice and righteousness! However difficult it may be for us to understand the history of Isaac and Ishmael, of Jacob and Esau, there can be no question about the integrity of God (compare [Deuteronomy 32:4](#)).

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.”**

Paul now resumes historical argumentation, but moves from the time of Malachi (just quoted in [v. 13](#), above) to the time of Moses, a jump backward of about 1,000 years. In so doing, Paul quotes a word from the Lord to Moses ([Exodus 33:19](#)), which was delivered as the people of Israel were camped at Mt. Sinai.

The dialogue occurred in the context of Moses' personal relationship with God, for Moses had found favor with the Lord ([Exodus 33:17](#)). Moses had begged the Lord to accompany Israel as it prepared to depart for the promised land, thereby revealing his presence to the other nations. The divine response reminded Moses that God alone decides which nation(s) he will favor. Israel had done nothing to deserve special treatment from God, for they were a stubborn lot (see [Exodus 33:5](#)). It was God's decision.

What Do You Think?

How should we react when God treats (or seems to treat) people differently?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding bestowal of blessings on believers
- Regarding bestowal of blessings on unbelievers
- Regarding differing bestowals of spiritual gifts
- Other

B. God Is Always Sovereign ([vv. 16-18](#))

16. It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

Paul now makes a most crucial point. His historical examples show that God's favor is not contingent *on human desire or effort*. We cannot wish for God's graciousness and cause it to happen. We cannot work for God's favor and find it as a reward. It is up to God to show mercy to us (compare [Ephesians 2:8, 9](#)). Paul has shown decisively in [Romans 1-3](#) that no human is deserving of mercy, otherwise it would not be mercy! The only reward we earn for our lives of sin is death ([Romans 6:23](#)).

17. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”

With reference to [Exodus 9:16](#), Paul continues his lesson on God's graciousness. The point at hand involves Pharaoh, the man who held the people of Israel as his slaves in Egypt. He was reluctant to free his workforce of slaves as Moses demanded. God therefore sent a series of plagues on Egypt.

Despite the great suffering these caused, Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses. It was just before the seventh plague that Moses delivered the words Paul quotes here, declaring that Pharaoh's power had nothing to do with him as a man. Rather, power had been given to him by the Lord. Pharaoh was an instrument in the divine drama that was orchestrated by the God of the universe for the purpose of declaring his name *in all the earth* through the new nation of Israel.

18. Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Paul ends with a *therefore* conclusion that contains both some of the most comforting and most chilling words in all the Bible. This is an astounding statement of God's graciousness in concert with his purposes. First, Paul reminds the reader that the mercy of God is at his initiative. What comfort in knowing that we serve a merciful God! We can leave behind any attempts to earn his favor and simply serve him out of love and gratitude.

Second, though, we are reminded that the purposes of God required the hardening of people like Pharaoh. This is the chilling part. Why would God use Pharaoh in this way? Doesn't this seem unfair? To come to grips with this, we must read the larger account of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the book of Exodus. When we do, we find that it speaks not only of God's hardening Pharaoh's heart ([Exodus 4:21](#); [7:3](#); [9:12](#); [14:4](#)), but also of Pharaoh's hardening his own heart earlier ([8:15](#), [32](#)). Pharaoh was a willing, stubborn, arrogant partner in his own hardening.

Likewise, we are entirely capable of maintaining an unrepentant spirit even though we see the evidence of God's mercy in his Word and in our lives. God's use of Pharaoh's evil heart is no excuse for Pharaoh's actions. While we may stand in wonder at the purposes of God in the history of Israel, we must also stand in awe of God's willingness to show mercy to us, rebellious sinners who do not deserve his favor.

What Do You Think?

How do you guard yourself against becoming hard-hearted?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Toward unbelievers

Toward fellow Christians

WHY WE PRAISE

In a brawl in the parking lot of a bar, one young man pushed another, who fell and hit his head on a car stop. The result was death. At his sentencing, the convicted man fell at the feet of his victim's mother, pouring out his remorse in tears. The mother raised him up, assured him of her forgiveness, and visited him frequently in prison. One of the most difficult actions to understand is that of a parent who forgives the killer of his or her child. And yet it does happen.

The basis for that is (or should be) the mercy and forgiveness of God that we see throughout history and which we have experienced. The prophet seemed amazed when he wondered, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin? ... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy" ([Micah 7:18](#)). The Lord longs for sinners to repent so that he can shower them with merciful grace. He is the Father willing to forgive sinful humans who killed his own Son.

Yet there are those who harden their hearts toward God and everything he holds dear. Even on deathbeds, some remain defiant. The way to keep from being one of those is to reflect on the ways that God has poured his abundant mercy and grace on you. When you do, you will be unable to do anything except offer up praise and thanks for his compassion.—D. C. S.



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Lesson 11

Visual for Lesson 11. *Point to this visual as you ask, “How can we work together to communicate God’s mercy to the lost?”*

Conclusion

A. Living the Life of Mercy

The Christian life should not be one of cowering in fear of the wrath of God. Yes, we deserve punishment for our rebellious sin. But we have been given life through our faith in Jesus and his atoning death. We may not be a titan of the world stage like Abraham, but we are important to God.

His mercy is personal, tailored for each of us according to our situation. Some of us are colossal sinners with epic résumés of evil in our past. Others are milquetoast sinners, with relatively bland personal histories. But all of us come to God with sin, and we escape his wrath because of his mercy.

Let us therefore live as joyous freed slaves rather than as gloomy victims. Let us be children of the free woman ([Galatians 4:31](#)), not slaves of sin. Let us not have brick-hard hearts, but soft, pliant ones that pump out love for God and others.

B. Prayer

Merciful Father, thank you for saving us from the justice our sins deserve. Protect us from hard hearts so we can share the good news of Jesus with others. We pray in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Live as if you have received God’s mercy—because you have.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Draw three hearts on the board, labeling them *Physical*, *Emotional*, and *Spiritual*. Ask learners what would characterize a heart that is hardened in a physical sense. (Possible responses will be along the lines of “hardening of the arteries,” etc.). Then ask what characterizes an emotionally hard heart. (Possible responses may include “being unmoved by the hurts and distress of others.”) Finally, ask what characterizes a spiritually hard heart. Guide learners to the fact that the heart is the center of the will in biblical usage. A person with a spiritually hard heart is in rebellion against God.

Then ask, “What Bible character was said to have a hard heart that God made even harder?” (Expected response: Pharaoh.) Continue: “Today’s lesson will show how God has worked through human sin and shortcomings to bestow his gift of mercy on the world.”

Into the Word

Form learners into pairs or groups of three to work on the following three assignments (on handouts you prepare), one per group. If you have more than nine learners, form additional groups and give duplicate

assignments.

Isaac Group (Romans 9:6-9). 1. How does the story of Isaac and Ishmael ([Genesis 21:1-13](#)) establish the point that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel”? 2. How is it possible for Gentiles (non-Israelites) to be considered children of Abraham (see [Galatians 3:7, 28, 29](#))?

Jacob Group (Romans 9:10-14). 1. Why was it astonishing for God to proclaim “The older will serve the younger” ([Genesis 25:23](#); compare [Deuteronomy 21:15-17](#))? 2. How did God use what might appear as an “unfair” or “unjust” choice to accomplish his purpose to show mercy to the world?

Moses and Pharaoh Group (Romans 9:15-18). 1. On what basis does God show and not show mercy to people and nations? 2. How do we know Pharaoh wasn’t treated unfairly when God hardened his heart to achieve divine purposes (compare [Exodus 8:15, 32](#) with [4:21](#); [7:3](#); [9:12](#); [14:4](#))?

Have groups present their conclusions in the ensuing whole-class discussion. Use [Matthew 3:9](#) and [John 8:39](#) to challenge learners to deeper thought on physical vs. spiritual offspring.

Option. Begin the Into the Word segment by distributing copies of the “Sons of the Promise—and Not” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. After a few minutes, ask volunteers to share their answers. This exercise will provide a visual backdrop to the lesson text.

Into Life

Write this question on the board for brainstorming: “If you were to create a plan to be a spiritual mentor to help someone grow in spiritual maturity by using today’s lesson text, what would that plan include?” Encourage rapid-fire responses, jotting them quickly on the board. Discuss as deeply as learners desire.

Option. Distribute the following statements on handouts to pairs of learners, giving duplicate assignments as necessary. 1. Ivy says, “When mom remarried after my dad died, she and my stepdad had my little sister. She’s always been their favorite! Even as adults, they are still helping her out, while I make my own way. It’s just not fair!” How do you respond? 2. James says, “When I became a Christian, my atheist parents disowned me. Now that they have died and left all their money to my brother, I wonder why God has allowed me to be treated so unfairly.” How do you respond?

Ask pairs to share their responses in whole-class discussion.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Spiritual Family Tree” activity from the reproducible page. Allow only 90 seconds for individual completion, then ask volunteers to share results.