

## Finding God's Plan for Your Life 1

Romans 9:13

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

I think it's something we are all concerned with -- God's plan for our lives. All of us around college graduate age are certainly concerned about it. I think that there are many concerned about it who are much further on in years. That is what I ask you to think about -- finding God's plan for your life.

In Romans 9:13 it says, "As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated". So obviously, our Creator is just as arbitrary and fickle as the Greek and Islamic myths imply that he is. Obviously, he looks at two little babies in their mother's womb, Jacob and Esau, and just in a fit of spite he says, "I'm going to love this one and I'm going to hate the other one." He predetermines their destiny at this moment -- one for heaven and the other for hell. Except that it certainly doesn't square with all the other things you know about him, does it? It doesn't square with John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 implies that God loves the whole world and that he would gladly welcome anybody who takes the death of his son seriously into their lives. It doesn't square with verses where Jesus spoke, (John 6:37) "... him who comes to me I will not cast out."

This verse implies that God is not one who rejects us. He will receive any of us who come to him with an open heart and a submissive will. It doesn't square with Jesus looking at Jerusalem and weeping and saying, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not." (Matthew 23:37) This verse implies that Jesus and his Father wanted Jerusalem to come to them but they could not make them come. And they wept over the fact that Jerusalem could go its own way. The picture we get of our Creator throughout the Bible is NOT one of a tyrant who predetermines our eternal destiny irrespective of what our wills do. The picture that we get of our Father is completely the other way. It's of a Father who loves us and wants us to come to him and the only reason that we lose his presence is because we don't want his presence.

What does Romans 9:13 mean? Obviously it doesn't mean what it seems to be on the surface -- that God sees Robin in his mother's womb and sees Jim in his mother's womb and just damns Robin and decides to save Jim. It obviously does not mean that. So what does it mean? The clue is the meaning of the words "love" and "hate" in the Bible. You can see the meaning if you look at Genesis 29 where they are both used. Jacob had two wives. In verses 30-31 it says: "So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren." Leah was not hated by Jacob. He had several sons by her after this and that verse tells about the birth of one of them. He continued to have intercourse with her. But he loved Rachel more. He sensed that Rachel was God's choice for him. Leah, though she was his wife, was not the person by whom the Israelites would receive their leaders. The love/hate word in Hebrew does not mean that you love one with loving affection and you hate another with anger and spite. It means that I choose this one and I reject that one. It says God loved Jacob and hated Esau. It is the same as saying that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. Another verse that makes it clear is John 12:25 where Jesus uses the word "hate". "He who loves his life loses it and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Jesus in his own life was not like a man who hated his life. He means that if you prefer life in this world to life in the next world you're wrong. You need to prefer life in the next world. He said the same about parents. "He who doesn't hate his mother and father for my sake and the Gospels," he doesn't mean that you have to hate your parents otherwise he'd be contradicting himself and his Father in the commandment that they give, "Honor your parents that your life may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you." Hate, when Jesus uses it, doesn't mean what WE mean by hate. Otherwise, they are contradicting themselves. It simply means I choose this one and I reject that one.

What we have said in the past few weeks is, when we say God chose Jacob and rejected Esau, we do not mean that God chose Jacob to go to heaven and chose Esau to go to hell. We shared how the whole thrust of this chapter is about Israel being chosen by God as the nation in which his Son, Jesus, would be born. The whole thrust of the chapter is not concerned with heaven and hell but with what Israel is to do in this world. The whole thrust about the comments of Jacob and Esau is not concerned with their eternal destiny but with their personal occupation here in this world. It is in that sense that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. He chose Jacob to be the third patriarch who would lead the Israelite nation in which his Son would be born.

This is what the verse means. Some of you know the word "predestination". One of the words for predestined in Greek is "proorizó." "Pro" is before and "orizo" you can see in the English word, horizon. A horizon is something that is plainly marked out. As you look out at a scene you see the horizon plainly marked out. That's what orizo means in Greek. It means to mark out or to design. And "proorizo" means God not so much predestined but "predesigned" Jacob to be the leader of the Israelite nation. And he predesigned Esau to be the leader of Edom.

Last week we said that just as God predesigned them to do certain jobs here on earth, so he has predesigned each of us. We did not come into the world by chance with the abilities and talents and opportunities that we have. God predesigned each one of you to do a certain job and to perform a certain function in his world -- besides the bigger purpose of loving him and being his friend and his son and daughter -- God also predesigned you to a certain job. In other words, your vocation is not a matter of chance. It is not a matter of scrambling down the want ads trying to get something that suits you. Your vocation is something that the Creator of the world has set. He knew what he wanted you to do when you came into this world. Your vocation is something that God has settled. He knows where he wants you to work.

Now the question is, how do you find God's plan for you -- if God has a plan? Most of the Eastern religions, and some of the Western ones, say you can't miss it. Fate ordains that you have to do a certain job -- so just sit back, sit home, drink Coke, eat ice cream all day and it will come. Fate ordains that you'll come to the position in life that has been set for you. Well, it isn't true. If you are in any doubt about whether we can frustrate God's plan for us or not, just look at Judas. Jesus obviously chose Judas in good faith and expected him to be a faithful disciple. Certainly, you can't imagine Jesus choosing him knowing that Judas would betray him. It would be just a charade if Jesus did that. Jesus chose Judas in good faith and planned a ministry for him. Yet Judas was able to frustrate the whole plan that God had for him simply by throwing over his plan and following his own.

How do you find God's plan for your life? How do you avoid frustrating it? For a moment, let's look at Jacob who did his best to do that: "And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren, And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebecca his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, If it is thus, why do I live? So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, two nations are in your womb, And the two peoples, born of you, shall be divided: the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:21). Rebecca was told by God that the elder one, Esau, will serve the younger one. Jacob is the one that is chosen by God to lead the Israelite nation.

Jacob, from the very beginning, was working to bring about God's plan for himself. You can see it in the next verses, Genesis 25:24-25: "When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold there were twins in her womb. The first came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they called his name Esau. Afterward, his brother came forth, and his hand had taken hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob," If you look at the footnote at the bottom of the page [in the RSV Bible], you'll see what "Jacob" means; he takes by the heel or he supplants. Even when he was a little baby, Jacob was in the business of trying to grab it for himself right from the start. "His name was called Jacob and Isaac was 60 years old when she bore him." We might say, naturally, he was anxious

to get on and succeed. He didn't know about the promise given to Rebecca. Obviously, he was trying to scramble to the top of the heap some way or another, to get some position of significance for himself.

Presumably, Rebecca explained it all to Jacob. When he came to the age where he could understand, she explained to him: "Now listen, your brother is the oldest, but you're going to be the one who is going to lead Israel." Jacob's reaction is in Genesis 27:18-19, "So he went in to his father and said 'My father': and he said, 'Here I am; who are you, my son?' Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau, your first born. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that you may bless me'". In other words, even after Rebecca explained to Jacob that, "Your Creator has a place for you, a job set for you. And you are going to be the one to lead Israel."

As soon as Jacob saw something that would jeopardize his inheriting the authority of his father, he went right in there with all his wily strategies, his cleverness, his manipulation and his working angles to make sure that God's plan for him was fulfilled. Even though he knew that God had planned the thing yet, he got worried as soon as anything occurred that seemed to jeopardize that plan. That was Jacob's whole life. Actually, in that situation, it was virtually disastrous. He almost succeeded in overturning the whole plan. Esau found out that Jacob had tried to deceive his father into thinking that he was Esau (verse 41): "Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him and Esau said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are approaching, then I will kill my brother Jacob.'" Jacob almost succeeded in frustrating God's whole plan for his life, because he was determined to bring it about by his own power, by his own cleverness and his own strategy.

Some of you may be sitting there saying, "Well, boy, I would not do that if I knew that God had my vocation set for me." God DOES have your vocation set for you. God knows the job that he has put you here on earth to do. And if you say to me, "Well, what should I do then?" Relax! Relax in that faith and see that God has given you certain abilities and certain interests. All you have to do is use and exercise those fully. You don't have to be working angles. You don't have to be manipulating yourself into a position from which you can gain some significance and importance in this life. God has set your significance and your importance even if you are the person that puts an odd nail in a board that nobody else sees. God regards that as absolutely significant from his point of view. He does not care if everybody sees you or knows about you. He wants you to stop trying to work angles, stop trying to grab at the heel of your brother, stop trying to deceive and bluff others into thinking that you are something that you are not. Just do what you are able to do with all your heart.

If you say to me, "Oh, I haven't any particular abilities or interests." That's very unlikely. Every one of us here in this room have some abilities or interests that we know of. Some teacher at some time said, "You are good at this." Or some mom or dad said, "You are very interested in that." You, yourself, know the stuff you read about. You know what you are interested in doing. So normally, that is the beginning of God's guidance to you. But say you can't establish any interests or abilities, then the job that you are doing at this time – whatever it is – it doesn't matter if it's brushing floors – whatever you are doing at this time, do it with all your heart. God's advice in Ecclesiastes 9:10 was, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."

In Ecclesiastes 3:10-13, you get the same kind of truth: "I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; also that it is God's gift to man that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil."

How do you find God's plan for your life? Enjoy what you are doing now. Do what your interests and abilities enable you to do. If you don't know what they are, what are you doing at this moment? Then

stop resenting it. Stop wishing you were somewhere else and do that job with all your heart. If you say to me, "Should we apply for any other jobs?" Yes, but apply with absolute faith and trust that your Maker will open up the right job to you and will close the wrong job down to you. Don't go into interviews like Jacob trying to deceive the people into thinking that you are better than you are, trying to make a better impression of yourself than is strictly true. Don't! Don't you see that is lack of faith? Don't you see that you can't have faith in God and faith in your own strategy and tricks as well? Don't you see that God looks down and wants to see an Israelite in whom there is no guile? He knows that, there, he has a man or woman who trusts him and so he is able to guide them. But when he sees us bluffing our way, deceiving, trying to make other people think we are something that we are not, God has to wash his hands of us because he says, "They have faith only in their own trickery and their own strategy. They don't have faith in what I have said, that I have put them here for a special purpose and that I will lead them to it naturally and easily."

How do you find God's plan for your life? Don't use trickery. Don't feel that you have to manipulate yourself into a position. You just have to be yourself, do what you are able to do with all your heart and God, your God, will lead you into the position he has for you however often it may appear that other people are going to prevent it.

There is something else that would release you if you would see it in Jacob's life. Do you remember what Jacob did after he found out that Esau was out to kill him? He ran away to Haran to his uncle Laban's place. Laban had two daughters, Rachel and Leah. Jacob fell in love with Rachel and said, "Laban, I'll serve you seven years if you will give me Rachael's hand in marriage." It's interesting that God has a way of getting us back with our own tricks. What happened was he served those seven years feeding pigs and cows. At the end of the seven years Laban actually bluffed him and gave him Leah as a wife instead. He didn't find out until the morning after that he discovered he had the wrong girl. So, he had to serve another seven years for Rachel. And then at the end of those seven years, which was fourteen years, he was given Rachel. After fourteen years of labor he had no possessions of his own. In order to get some cattle and sheep that he could own for himself that he could use to bring up his family, he served another six years. At the end of it we get Jacob's words -- and it is a position we never want to get ourselves into: "These 20 years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night." (Genesis 31:41)

He spent twenty years out of God's plan for his life in order to get the people and the things that he thought would make him happy. Don't ever get yourself into the position where you are doing some job because you will get future reward. Don't get into that spot. I know dear brothers who have slogged away at jobs for a lifetime because they were looking forward to retirement. Never exchange the precious abilities and interests that God has given you and suppress them in order to get what you think are the people or the things or the money to make you happy. God will give you all the happiness you need as you exercise fully your personality.

Never get yourself out of God's plan for your life by always living for the future. The only way to be in God's plan for your life is to concentrate on doing what you CAN do with all your heart. That is why God put you here. That's why he gave you your abilities – not to exchange them for some dollars in the future, or some things or people that will give you happiness. He expects you to get real happiness just from what you are doing.

You look at a little dog. It just enjoys running. It doesn't care whether it is going to get a bone at the end of the day or not. It just enjoys running. And that is why God has put us here. God has given you certain abilities and certain things that you can do and you'll get complete happiness in doing those things – but never, never prostitute them into some situation where you work and slog for twenty years because you are hoping that you will get something at the end of it to make you

happy.

There is a sobering piece in Ecclesiastes 2:18-25: "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation; even in the night his mind does not rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"

So that's it – ENJOY what you're doing now! Don't be living for tomorrow. Those of you in degree programs, don't be always living for graduation. It may never come. Maybe the university will fall apart before then! Live for today with all your heart. And do today with all your heart what you can do. And if you do that, God will guide you to tomorrow. Eventually, Jacob had to come to the point where Howard Hughes reached. With all his striving Howard Hughes could not establish his own security. He died a poor lonely man in conditions that even the most poverty stricken in our country probably did not suffer. And so, with all his efforts he could never make himself secure.

So it was with Jacob. Jacob came to a place where he was returning to his homeland. He was scared of meeting Esau, his brother, who had threatened to kill him. And you remember there was a remarkable encounter that took place at that time where it says a man wrestled with Jacob -- wrestled with him to the break of day. Of course, the man was an angel and it was a wrestling in prayer. And then he touched Jacob's thigh and put it out of joint. For the rest of his life Jacob had to limp. And the whole truth is that eventually Jacob came to the point where Hughes reached where he saw, "With all my efforts I cannot establish my own significance by my work. I cannot establish my own happiness by my work. I cannot establish my own security. Here I am, facing my brother, and he's going to kill me," And at last he came to the point where he saw, "With all my abilities I cannot manipulate my own security and ensure it." The strength that was destroyed by the angel that made Jacob limp for the rest of his life, was that strength of his own cleverness, his own wiles and his own trickery by which he misused the abilities that God had given him. Instead of using them for the purpose that God had given them for, he misused them in order to try to ensure his own happiness, his own security and his own significance. At last he came to the point where he had to die to that and stop that. At last he was free to be himself.

There are artists here who are always concerned with how to prostitute the old talent into getting themselves secure. And not only artists, I think there are writers here who do that. There are many of us who do it. There are bankers here who do it. There are teachers here who do it. Instead of looking at their abilities as something good in themselves that they have to exercise with all their power in order to fulfill the purpose that God has for them here on earth, they try to use these abilities and try to parlay them into the amount of money that they need or the amount of security or the amount of happiness that they need. Security, significance, and happiness will be given to you by your dear Father. He'll give you all you need and you'll never need more than he gives you. He'll give you all the security you need, all the significance you need, all the happiness you need if you concentrate on doing a good job for its own sake.

I remember the joy that came into my own life as a teacher of English literature when I at last just decided, "I'm going to enjoy teaching English literature. Whether this is going to be my future for the rest of my life or not, I'll enjoy it." Once as a chaplain to an old people's home, I thought, "Am I going to be a chaplain to an old people's home for the rest of my life?" And, oh, what a joy came when I said, "Lord, thank you. This is an enjoyable thing to do. I'm going to enjoy this. If

it's to be for the rest of my life, I'll enjoy it."

Loved ones, your job would be entirely different tomorrow morning if you would stop trying to use it to get the security you need, or the significance you need, or the happiness you need – if you would just do it with all your heart, then God will lead you gently and smoothly into his plan for your life. I would just guarantee it. A brother came up after service last Sunday morning and said, "You told me these things five years ago and I want to tell you that they are true. I'm in a position that I dreamed of and I wasn't at the time I talked to you. But I know that God leads you if you concentrate on what he's given you to do at this time."

So, loved ones, treasure it. I don't know what you're all doing tomorrow morning, but treasure what it is. Enjoy it and say, "Lord, thank you for it and thank you for the abilities you have given me to do it well." And the Father will lead you faithfully -- he will because he'll see that you trust him and you believe that he has put you here for a purpose.

Let us pray:

Dear Father, we would each thank you that we are not just little cogs in some massive machine, but we are precious individuals, unique in this world, put here by you to fulfil a certain purpose -- first and foremost -- to love you with all our hearts and to know you as our friend. But secondly, to do a certain job here in this world. We thank you, Lord, that you will unerringly lead us into that position if we leave that up to you -- if we leave the employment problem up to you, if we leave the vocational counselling up to you and we, ourselves, find out what abilities and interests you've given us and exercise them with all of our hearts in joy, peace and faith. Thank you, Lord, that it is so simple – and thank you that it IS so simple, however often we try to complicate it. Thank you that it is simple and plain so that even the ware-faring man will be able to find it. Thank you, Lord. Now, may the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us. Amen.