



‘Esau Have I Hated’

God is love, but is He also hate? Paul explains the sovereignty of God in election. What was the essential difference between Esau and Jacob? They had the same mother and father, Rebecca and Isaac. Conceived at the same time they were twins. If anything, Esau had a priority over Jacob because he came first out of the womb. Before they were born and before they had done good or evil it was said to Rebecca, *‘The elder shall serve the younger’* (Rom. 9:12). Paul then quotes the words of God through Malachi: *‘As it is written, Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated’* (v 13). To the modern human mind that seems a bit hard. It appears to judge and condemn someone and hate them before they have done any wrong.

But Paul in his day was also conscious that people would be critical of God. He writes: *‘What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid’* (v 14). Away with the thought that there could be any unrighteousness in God. He is the Judge of all the earth and infinitely just and couldn’t possibly be unrighteous. Paul adds: *‘For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy’* (vv 15-16).

Because all mankind sinned and fell with Adam in his first transgression, all are guilty even before they are born and none deserve mercy or salvation. None of us have a right to demand that God loves us. We all deserve to be hated because we have rebelled against God and broken His gracious covenant which He made with Adam and with us. God is free to have mercy on whom He will have mercy and to harden whom He will (v 18).

Hate is a harsh word

Yet hate is a very harsh word. How are we to understand it? To help explain it, the words of Jesus are sometimes quoted: *‘If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple’* (Lk. 14:26). Jesus here is not encouraging us to hate our parents. The fifth commandment demands that we honour them. Rather, Jesus is warning against loving our parents more than we love Christ. We must not make an idol of our father or mother. Further we must not let our parents keep us from Christ. We have to obey God rather than man. In that sense ‘hate’ means ‘love very much less’.

This helps somewhat in the understanding of *‘Esau have I hated’*. God’s mercy and favour to Esau is very much less than to Jacob who was one of God’s elect and therefore was loved with an infinite, eternal and unchangeable love. To Esau as to the non-elect in general God showed much kindness; He sent many blessings to him, required the sign of the covenant of grace to be set upon him (circumcision) and stretched out His hands all day in mercy (Rom. 10:21).

It is vitally important to remember the teaching of Christ in the sermon on the mount: *‘But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust’* (Mt. 5:44-45). Love your enemies since the Father shows love to His enemies.

Jacob have I loved

Recently reflecting on the words '*Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated*' I felt I was given a new and helpful insight. They are a quotation from Malachi and so in interpreting them it is helpful to go back to the original context. The words were addressed to Jacob. They are not meant as a stick to beat the non-elect who are anyway hidden from us, much less the unregenerate who may yet be saved. Election is often seen as a barrier keeping men and women from Christ. It was that in my own personal experience as I sought the Lord. I often heard the words preached, '*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*' (Acts 16:31). But how could I believe in Christ if I wasn't in the elect and He hadn't died for me? The answer is certainly not that you have to first find out that you are in the elect, and then believe. Election is not a message for the unconverted. Rather to the sinner we must proclaim the 'good news' that Christ died on the cross to save sinners and that every sinner must repent and believe the gospel and that whosoever believes will be saved.

'Esau have I hated' is not a message to Esau but to Jacob. The prophecy of Malachi is addressed to Israel. It begins with the words: '*I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation forever. And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, the LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel*' (Mal. 1:2-5). Israel were forgetting the amazing love with which God had loved them. They failed to see the contrast between God's love to them and His dealings with Esau. God appeared to have indignation forever against Esau. God does not deal with Jacob like that. Jacob, you should love God because of His love to you. Why are you dishonouring God your loving heavenly Father (v 6)?

Electing love

Electing love is a wonderful message to the Christian. God has loved you from all eternity. You are special to Him, not because of anything in you, or anything which He saw you going to do, or any potential you have. Rather He simply loved you because He loved you and having loved you He predestined you to be His child. Rejoice in God, love Him in return with all your heart and serve Him with all your might. Keep before your mind's eye the different way He has treated you from the way He has treated the Esaus whom he has not elected. Let your election and the rejection of others be a great motive in rendering obedience to Him. Paul speaks of the great power that compelled him to labour more abundantly than all the other apostles: '*the love of Christ constraineth us*' (2 Cor. 5:14). That love is particularly revealed in election and the cross.

Our Westminster Confession

Many ministers handle the doctrine of election in a reckless, unwise and harmful way and that is why the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 3 section VIII gives the following warning:

'The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the Gospel.'

William Macleod