

Why did God hate Esau?

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In Romans 9:13 Paul quotes Malachi 1:3, where God says: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”. So why did God love Jacob but hate his brother Esau? The short answer is that we’re not told, and therefore we don’t know.

However, Paul’s point in Romans 9:6-29, is that God elects, or chooses, those whom He desires. Just because a person is a descendant of Israel (Jacob) doesn’t mean that they’re one of God’s people (Romans 9:6-7). Rather it is those who are “of the promise” (Romans 9:8) who are God’s children. Therefore, Isaac was one of God’s children, but his half-brother Ishmael wasn’t. Similarly, with the twin brothers Jacob and Esau – God chose Jacob, but not Esau. And this was before they were born (Romans 9:11). Therefore, Jacob’s election and Esau’s rejection by God was not dependent on anything they did – rather it was God’s free sovereign choice. Paul unpacks this further in the rest of the chapter. However, the key principle is in Romans 9:15; 9:18:

“For He [God] says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”... So then He [God] has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills.”

God's election

Paul's point is that election “depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Romans 9:16). Therefore, why did God hate Esau? As I said before, we're not told. But we do know that it was according to God's sovereign election.

However, God's election of some people but not others, doesn't give people an excuse not to turn to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith. Paul addresses this objection in Romans 9:19-21:

“You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same

lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?”

Obey God

God commands “all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Therefore, if you have not yet repented and turned to the Lord, don’t worry about whether God has elected you. Rather, obey God, by confessing your disobedience towards Him and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of that disobedience.

A final point to make is that it might sound rather harsh to us to hear that God hates certain people. However, this reflects God’s attitude to those who are not His people (see for example, Psalms 5:5; 11:5), and is closely related to God’s wrath (cf. Romans 1:18-20). However, it is also important to realize that God is not like us. If we’re angry with a person, that tends to be our only emotion/attitude towards them. However, God can still love (in some sense) those He hates. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:45:

“For He [the Father] makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

In other words, God does good (that is, in some sense He loves), even those who are evil, those whom He hates, as He provides sun and water for them.

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