

XX. The Sovereignty of God

September 27/28/29, 2016

Romans 9:6-18

Aim: To appreciate the sovereignty of God as expressed in His eternal decrees of election unto salvation and foreordination unto condemnation.

Moo

According to the typical understanding of Jewish Christians in Paul's day, salvation history had taken an unexpected turn. Most of the people of Israel to whom the promises of salvation had been given refused to recognize the fulfillment of those promises. At the same time Gentiles, who were considered to be excluded from the covenant, were embracing the one in whom those promises had come to fruition. Paul insists, however, that this turn of events, though unexpected, does not violate the integrity of God's word and His promises. Paul justifies that claim by showing what God's word itself says about becoming a member of God's true spiritual people. If the OT teaches that belonging to physical Israel in itself makes a person a member of God's true spiritual people, then Paul's gospel is in jeopardy. Paul therefore argues that belonging to God's true spiritual people has always been based on God's gracious and sovereign call and not on ethnic identity. Therefore, God is free to 'narrow' the apparent boundaries of election by choosing only some Jews to be saved (vv. 6-13; 27-29). He is also free to 'expand' the dimensions of His people by choosing Gentiles (vv. 24-26). Throughout, Paul argues from Scripture, seeking to convince both his Jewish and Gentile Christian readers in Rome that his viewpoint is rooted in the OT.

Sproul

The doctrine of election appears on virtually every page of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. No section of Scripture sets it forth, however, more definitively and persuasively than Romans 9. The Swiss theologian Roger Nicole once made the observation that we are, by nature, Pelagian. We assume that we have the power to incline our hearts to Christ while we are yet in the flesh. Our natural hostility to the sovereignty of grace is not instantly cured by conversion, which is why a majority of Christians still ride the horse of semi-Pelagianism and seek to escape the full implications of the doctrine of election. In the opinion of church history, there is no portion of Scripture that teaches the unconditional election of God in His sovereign grace more persuasively than Romans 9.

The doctrine of election set forth in Romans 9 is absolutely clear. Despite the perspicuity of the text, the majority of professing evangelicals in our day deny the doctrine of unconditional election. People use four basic ways to get around it. 1) The easiest and most common way of getting around the doctrine of election is to ignore or avoid it. People direct the discussion to other portions of Scripture, staying studiously away from Romans 9. 2) Others say that Paul in Romans 9 is not writing about God's sovereign election of individuals but about God's sovereign election of nations to a particular historic destiny, specifically Israel as distinguished from Syria, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, or other nations of antiquity. The grace that the apostle is expounding here, they argue, is not saving grace but the promise of earthly benefits, such as the inheritance of a piece of real estate, which is still very much contested, even with violence. However, when Paul makes his point about election, he mentions individuals. He writes about Jacob and Esau. Paul specifically discusses the selection of one individual over another, Jacob over Esau. The reference to individuals cannot be ignored, so the argument falls by its own weight. 3) Closely

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related to that argument is a third one: in Romans 9 Paul is writing about God's election of individuals for temporal blessings. Some are elected to inherit land, possessions, herds, and goats, but not salvation. I cannot imagine a more astonishing interpretation of the text. In order to interpret Romans 9 in this manner, it has to be pulled away from its connection to Romans 1-8. Paul introduced the doctrine of predestination in chapter 8, verses 29-30. There Paul clearly puts the idea of predestination in the context of personal salvation, a theme he has been developing since chapter 1. To see the apostle as describing in chapter 9 anything other than real salvation is to clutch at straws. 4) The fourth attempt to escape the teaching of Romans 9 is the most popular view by appealing to God's foreknowledge, the doctrine of prescience. Supposedly, God looks down the corridor of time and knows in advance how people will respond when they hear the gospel. He chooses for salvation those whom He knows will say yes to Christ, but he rejects those who He knows will reject Him. This doctrine thus holds that while God does elect individuals to ultimate salvation, the ground of that election is rooted in His prescience His prior awareness of what people will do when they are given the gospel.

Hughes

Paul knew from his constant interaction with his fellow Jews that his insistence that they were lost evoked this objection: 'Paul, indeed we have had all the privileges that you mention, and they are so great that if we are lost God has failed. He does not keep His word!' In anticipation of such a response Paul now defends the character of God. Technically, this is called a 'theodicy' – a vindication of the justness of God. Paul traces the history of God's dealings with Israel and shows God to be righteous and just.

A word of caution before we proceed: This is one of the least popular passages in the Scriptures because Paul bases his defense of God's character on the doctrine of *election*, which teaches that before the world was created God chose who would receive salvation. This does not jibe with our natural way of thinking. In fact, this section runs so counter to man's normal thought that I know of one pastor who simply skipped it as he preached through Romans. We must avoid such a mistake for the sake of our own souls and of the church. What is taught here is beyond our complete understanding.

Despite our frailty, it is of the greatest importance that though we may not fully grasp the doctrine of election, we understand as much as we can what the Scriptures teach and believe it, for it bears heavily on the doctrine of God. In our day of horizontal focus, when so much is being attributed to man, the concept of God has become decadent and vacuous for many. The need for Scriptural teaching on this matter has never been greater.

We should also note that the doctrine of election is nothing new. It was the view of Tyndale and Wycliffe, of the hymn-writers Isaac Watts and John Newton, of the evangelist George Whitefield, of the revivalist-theologian Jonathan Edwards, of the founder of modern missions William Carey, of the Reformers Melancthon, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Hus, Knox, and of a host of Puritans and great preachers such as C. H. Spurgeon and Alexander Whyte. It is a basic element of Christian theology.

A. The Choice of God in Election (Romans 9:6-13)

Paul's distinction between a broader, ethnic, Israel and a narrower, 'spiritual,' Israel (v. 6b) is his basic defense of the proposition that 'the word of God has not failed.' He justifies the distinction in two parallel arguments (vv. 7-9 and 10-13). In each, Paul quotes the OT twice to contrast two

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brothers. God's choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael and Jacob rather than Esau reveals a pattern in God's creation of His spiritual people that Paul applies to the problem of widespread Jewish unbelief in his own day. For these stories about the founders of the Jewish people demonstrate that the reason why some were included in the people of God and others were not was that God freely chose some and did not choose others. Physical descent, these stories show, was not the crucial qualification. In the same way, Paul implies, belonging to the New Covenant people of God is based on God's free choice and is not a birthright. Thus it should be no surprise, and certainly no threat to the integrity of God's word, if many Jews have failed to trust Christ and to be saved.

1. Has God's Word Failed? (9:6)

a) Statement (9:6a)

⁶*But it is not as though the word of God has failed.*

The first half of v. 6 is the transition between the introduction and the 'body' of Paul's exposition in chapters 9-11. Paul makes clear that the problem of Israel is at the same time the problem of God's word and, ultimately, of God Himself. For God has adopted Israel, revealed Himself to her, bound her to Him with His covenants, and given her His law, the temple service, and His promises. Do these now mean nothing? Has God revoked these blessings and gone back on His word to Israel? Many Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, in Rome and elsewhere, must have thought that this was the logical implication of Paul's radical critique of the Jewish assumption of guaranteed salvation (cp. e.g., Rom. 2). And, if God had indeed reneged on His earlier word, the consequences were dire for more than the Jews. For how could Christians trust such a God to fulfill His promises to them?

Has the word of God failed? This is not a piece of aimless musing on Paul's part. Rather, he is probably responding to a sustained polemic against him formulated by Jews resistant to his message to them. He raised this issue briefly earlier in the letter (3:3). Now he must discuss it at greater length. Most likely such people were found among his readers in Rome. Their argument would have been that Israel was God's chosen nation *and* that God's promises do not fail, in particular his 'word' to Abraham promising descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens (Gen. 15:5). If Jews *en bloc* accepted Paul's message this would be evidence of its genuineness. But the rejection by most Jews of his message is proof in itself that Paul's message is not from God, that he is no messenger of God. Clearly the failure of the greater number of Jews to receive Jesus as Messiah is being cast up at Paul. How will he answer these charges?

Briefly, Paul will point out that God's election of Israel had never been absolute and global. There had always been an elect 'core' within an elect nation. In principle, a limited response by Jews to the word of God was nothing new. Accordingly, Paul asserts at the outset that 'the word of God has not fallen.' This picks up his reference to 'the promises' (v. 4) and, much earlier, to 'the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures' (1:2) and to 'the words of God' entrusted to Israel (3:2). Clearly, the notion of 'the words of God' / 'the promises' / 'the word of God' is critical to Paul; his message is that these 'words' have now, indeed, been fulfilled.

He begins by declaring, 'It is not as though the word of God has failed' (or more literally, 'has fallen'). The Lord had not abrogated or in any way invalidated the ultimate fulfillment of His unconditional promises (v. 4) to the Jews.

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Thus Paul must affirm that ‘it is not that the word of God has failed.’ The ‘word of God’ might refer specifically to the gospel. But the sequence of thought requires that the ‘word of God’ mentioned in v. 6 is that word which contains the privileges just listed (vv. 4-5) and to which Paul makes reference throughout the chapter. Therefore ‘the word of God’ is God’s OT word, with particular reference to His promises to Israel.

b) Thesis (9:6b)

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel...

There was an ‘Israel’ within ‘Israel,’ an elect group within the elect people. Abraham had ‘descendants’ (v. 7), but not all were ‘children.’

Paul now introduces his first justification for the denial that Israel’s unbelief nullifies God’s promises to Israel, a justification that gets to the heart of the matter: Who constitutes the ‘Israel’ to whom God’s promises of salvation have been given? The standard view among Paul’s Jewish contemporaries was that this Israel was made up of all those physically descended from Jacob, the heir of Abraham and Isaac, who was himself named ‘Israel.’ Only those who had refused their inheritance by outright apostasy would be excluded from this Israel to whom the promises belonged. Paul does not deny that ethnic Israel remains God’s people in some sense (cp. 9:4-5; 11:1-2, 28). But he denies that this corporate election of Israel means the salvation of all Israelites; and he insists that salvation has never been *based* on ethnic descent (see 2:1-29; 4:1-16). Therefore the people of Israel cannot look to their birthright as a guarantee of salvation. This is the point that Paul makes by asserting that ‘all who belong to Israel (in a physical sense) do not belong to Israel (in a spiritual sense).’

Paul has to work against the idea that salvation is passed on biologically or through the visible nation of Israel. Following Augustine, we distinguish between the visible church and the invisible church. The point of the distinction is that not all members of a visible church are redeemed. Not everybody in the visible church is numbered among the elect but only those of the invisible church. It is called ‘invisible’ because we cannot read the hearts of the congregation. People cannot read my heart, but God can. The invisible church is absolutely manifest to the scrutiny of Almighty God. He knows His own, and though we may seek to fool our fellow citizens about our state of grace, nobody has ever fooled God about the state of his or her own heart.

Paul makes that same distinction. Just because somebody is an ethnic Jew, a member of the commonwealth of Israel, does not mean that he is saved. The Pharisees fell into that trap. They said, ‘Abraham is our father’ (Jn. 8:39), as if that automatically guaranteed them entrance into the kingdom of God. Not every Jew is a child of promise. Looking to the Old Testament, Paul says that belonging to the seed of Abraham is no guarantee of entry into the kingdom of God.

Paul supports this distinction between ethnic and spiritual Israel and explains its basis in vv. 7-13. His argument falls into two sections, vv. 7-9 and vv. 10-13, in each of which he cites and comments on Scripture to prove his point.

2. Example 1: Isaac and Ishmael (9:7-9)

a) Quotation of Genesis 21:12 (9:7)

...⁷and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’

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Paul begins where anyone seeking to define ‘Israel’ must begin: with Abraham. God’s call of and promises to Abraham were the basis for both physical and spiritual Israel (cp. Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-5; 17:1-8, 15-16, 19-21; 18:18-19; 22:17-18). Jews therefore looked to their descent from Abraham as the source of their spiritual benefits: they were the ‘children’ or ‘seed’ (Greek *σπέρμα*, *sperma*, a collect singular noun, e.g., ‘descendants’) of Abraham. It is this assumption that Paul calls into question: ‘Not all of Abraham’s children are his seed.’ To be a child of Abraham in a physical sense Paul is saying, is not necessarily to be his descendant in a spiritual sense. Salvation is not a Jewish birthright.

Paul finds support for the distinction between physical and spiritual descent from Abraham in Genesis 21:12 – ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’ These words of God to Abraham come in response to his reluctance to follow Sarah’s advice to banish his son Ishmael and Ismael’s mother Hagar. They remind Abraham of a crucial distinction between his two sons. The ‘calling’ of descendants ‘in’ Isaac therefore involves more than the promise of physical offspring. For God promised that He would give many descendants to Ishmael as well as to Isaac (Gen. 17:20; 21:23). The advantage of Isaac lies rather in the spiritual realm; it is with Isaac, and not Ishmael, that God promises to establish His covenant (Gen. 17:21). It is from among Isaac’s descendants – not Ishmael’s – that God will call individuals to become part of His covenant people.

As Abraham’s son, Ishmael would receive his own special blessings from God (Gen. 17:18, but he was not and never could have been the heir of God’s promise. After Sarah died, Abraham had six other sons by a new wife, Keturah (25:1-2), but, like Ishmael, none of those could have been the heir of promise. Not only could the descendants of those sons not be the children of promise, but even the privileged descendants of Sarah through Isaac could not become full heirs of the promise merely by their physical lineage. God has always known that Jews would be spiritually dead and cut off from the promise and from salvation. Because some Jews reject Jesus does not prove He is not Messiah, nor does it denigrate the integrity of God. He knew there would be unbelieving Jews throughout all Israel’s history.

b) Principle (9:8)

⁸*This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.*

Verse 7 in itself provides little support for Paul’s assertion in v. 6b that ‘not all those who are of Israel belong to [spiritual] Israel.’ To claim that covenant blessings descended only through the line of Isaac was no more than what all Jews acknowledged – indeed, insisted on. But it is the conclusion Paul draws from his quotation in v. 7b that distances Paul’s view from that of his Jewish compatriots and buttresses his assertion in v. 6b. Verse 8 is Paul’s ‘commentary’ on his quotation of Gen. 21:12. This commentary contrasts ‘the children of the flesh’ with the ‘children of promise,’ and asserts that only the latter can be truly considered ‘the children of God.’ The immediate reference is to Ishmael – tied to Abraham only by natural descent (‘the flesh’) – and Isaac – tied to Abraham by both natural descent *and* God’s promise.

The two boys Isaac and Ishmael immediately illustrate Paul’s point. Physical descent from the primal and elect patriarch, Abraham, does not constitute Isaac and Ishmael as both ‘elect.’ Clearly Ishmael is rejected. The point is that, just as not all of Abraham’s physical children are to inherit the promise of belonging to the people of God physically, only those of Isaac, so neither do all of Abraham’s children through Isaac belong to the people of God spiritually.

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‘Children of God’ in Paul always denotes people who belong to God and thus partake of His salvation (Rom. 8:16, 17, 21; Eph. 5:1; Phil. 2:5). The phrase ‘reckoned as’ likewise translates a Greek phrase (*λογιζομαι εις*, *logizomai eis*) that Paul elsewhere uses only when referring to Gen. 15:6, a text that Paul quotes to prove that Abraham’s faith brought him into righteous relationship with God (Rom. 4:3, 5, 22; Gal. 3:6). And the reference to ‘promise,’ while applicable immediately to the promise expressed in Gen. 21:12, also harks back to the arguments of Romans 4 (cp. vv. 13, 14, 16, 20), where Paul discusses the means by which God brings people into relationship with Himself. Thus God’s words to Abraham in Gen. 21:12, according to Paul, imply a principle according to which God acts in bestowing His covenant blessings: ‘what counts is grace, not race.’

c) Quotation of Genesis 18:10, 14 (9:9)

⁹*For this is what the promise said: ‘About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.’*

Paul now explains his use of the word ‘promise’ to describe Isaac (and others like him) in his commentary on Gen. 21:12 (in v. 8). Isaac, though like Ishmael a natural son of Abraham, was born in unusual circumstances as a direct act of God in fulfillment of His promise. The promise that Abraham and Sarah, despite their advanced age and the latter’s barrenness, would have a child is first made in Gen. 17:15-16 and then reiterated in 18:10 and 14. Paul’s quotation appears to be a loose paraphrase of one or both of the latter two verses. Paul emphasizes again God’s initiative in creating His covenant people: not by natural generation but by God’s supernatural intervention is the promise to Abraham fulfilled.

In other words, natural descent (the Jewish bloodline) was not sufficient. In verses 8, 9 Paul uses the famous example of Isaac and Ishmael to illustrate the principle of divine choice. Though Ishmael was descended from Abraham, God chose Isaac. In fact, God arranged for Isaac’s birth by working a miracle in the darkness of Sarah’s womb.

3. Example 2: Jacob and Esau (9:10-13)

In vv. 10-13 Paul moves down one patriarchal generation to develop further his distinction between an ethnic and a spiritual Israel (v. 6b). In fact, God’s choice of Jacob rather than Esau illustrates particularly clearly the principle of ‘grace rather than race’ developed in vv. 7-9. Three particulars in the scriptural story about God’s choice of Jacob over Esau provide Paul with powerful support for his insistence that covenant participation comes only as the result of God’s call. First, Jacob and Esau shared the same father and mother. This silences the objector who might argue that Isaac was preferred over Ishmael simply because they had different mothers. Second, God promised that Jacob would be preeminent before the twins were born, implying that it was God’s will alone, and not natural capacity, religious devotion, or even faith that determined their respective destinies. Third, Jacob’s being the younger of the two makes it even more clear that normal human preferences had nothing to do with God’s choice.

Paul realizes that his detractors would argue that God chose Isaac because he was the son of Abraham’s full wife Sarah, whereas Ishmael was born of Hagar, so he submits another case—that of Jacob and Esau, who were the sons of one mother.

a) Historical Situation (9:10)

¹⁰*And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac...*

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The transitional phrase ‘and not only this’ makes clear that vv. 10-13 take the argument of vv. 7-9 one step further. Paul sees an important similarity between Sarah and Rebekah. The point of comparison is obvious: Rebekah, like Sarah, was barren; Rebekah’s barrenness, like Sarah’s was overcome by divine intervention (Gen. 25:21); and, especially important for Paul’s argument, Rebekah’s son, like Sarah’s, was called by God to become the heir of the covenant promises (see v. 12). In addition, both of the sons who so inherited the covenant promises had a rival. But it is at this point that a critical difference in the two situations exists: Isaac’s rival was but a half-brother, the son of a different woman, while Jacob’s rival was his own twin.

Abraham bore children (elect and non-elect) by several women. Isaac, however, had one wife, Rebekah, and from one act of sexual intercourse, and from one emission of his semen were born the twins Esau and Jacob, one elect, the other non-elect.

Most translations suggest Paul is simply referring to the birth of both Jacob and Esau from the same father, ‘our ancestor Isaac.’ This point fails, however, to advance Paul’s argument, for the essential situation is then no different than it was in the case of Isaac and Ishmael, who were both children of Abraham. It is therefore attractive to interpret Paul’s Greek as a reference to the one act of conception that produced the twins Jacob and Esau (‘And not only this, but also Rebekah, when she conceived children in one act of intercourse with Isaac, our ancestor’). Paul would then be highlighting the utter lack of natural distinguishing characteristics separating Jacob and Esau. Born of the same mother, sharing the same father, and conceived at the same point in time, neither of the twins had a better claim to the divine promise as a birthright than the other.

b) Principle (9:11)

...¹¹ *though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—...*

For it was before Jacob and Esau were born and before, therefore, they had done anything, whether good or evil, that God predicted to Rebekah that ‘The greater shall serve the lesser.’ This lack of any human reason for the differentiation between Jacob and Esau is the basis for the purpose clause in v. 11b – ‘so that God’s purpose according to election might remain.’ For God’s purpose in election is established not simply by virtue of God’s prediction of Jacob’s preeminence over Esau, but by the fact that this prediction was made apart from any basis in the personal circumstances of Jacob and Esau. The word ‘purpose’ (*προθεσις, prothesis*) denotes a predetermined plan that God would use to bring covenant blessings to a people, Israel, and eventually to the world.

Paul’s use of the word ‘election’ (*εχλογη, echlogē*) to characterize this plan reflects his purpose in this part of Romans 9 to demonstrate that God’s plan has unfolded in the OT by a series of free ‘choices’ that He has made. Isaac was chosen; Ishmael was not. Jacob was chosen; Esau was not. By these choices God has seen to it that His plan to bring into existence a people who would be His ‘peculiar possession’ would ‘remain’ (*μενω, menō*, ‘abide; stand firm’). If God’s plan depended on the vagaries of sinful human beings for its continuance, then, indeed, God’s ‘word’ would have fallen to the ground long ago (see v. 6a). But God’s purpose in history is fulfilled because He Himself ‘elects’ people to be part of that purpose.

God did not choose both sons to continue the physical line of promise but sovereignly elected Jacob and passed over Esau before they were even born. And just as He chose them without any regard for what they would do in their lives, but purely ‘that God’s purpose...might stand’ with no regard for any human work, so God has chosen some Jews, not all, for salvation.

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Unconditionally, and completely apart from any consideration of human merit, God elects those who will become His heirs of promise.

God's choice of Jacob over Esau came before either had 'done anything good or evil'; therefore, Paul now concludes, this choice must not have been based on works but on God's call. This new assertion advances Paul's argument by making it clear that the temporal relationship between Jacob's and Esau's works and God's choice mirrors a causal relationship as well: God's choice not only came *before* they had done anything but also was not *based on* anything they had done. The particular phrase Paul uses here – '[not] on the basis of works' (*[ουχ ἐξ ἔργων, ouch ez ergón]*) – is prominent in Paul's discussion of Abraham's justification in Rom. 4 (cp. vv. 2-8). The use of this phrase, along with the general way in which Paul states the matter, suggests that he has more in mind here than the situation of Jacob and Esau per se. As Paul in v. 9 drew from the history of Isaac and Ismael a principle about the way God bestows His covenant blessings, so He now derives another principle about the basis for God's election from the history of Isaac's sons.

God's election of one brother and not the other was evident before Esau and Jacob were born, before either had the opportunity to do good or evil works. That Jacob was chosen and Esau was not depended entirely upon God's choice, though both were twin boys of the one father and the one mother. Everything rested on God 'who calls.' Neither the author of Genesis nor Paul the apostle give an explanation as to the 'why' of God's election. It is the deepest of deep mysteries.

Contrasted with 'works' as the basis for God's election is 'the one who calls' (*τον χαλουντος, ton chalountos*). Highlighted again is the activity of the God of creation and history whose own word powerfully and irresistibly brings about what He chooses. The contrast between human activity and God's activity suggests that Paul wants to base election in what God does and not in anything that the human being does. Surely, if Paul had assumed that faith was the basis for God's election, he would have pointed this out when he raised the question in v. 14 about the fairness of God's election. All he would have needed to say at that point was 'of course God is not unjust in choosing Jacob and rejecting Esau, for His choosing took into account the faith of one and the unbelief of the other.' Paul's silence on this point is telling.

a) Quotation of Genesis 25:23 (9:12)

...¹²she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'

Verse 11 interrupts the flow of Paul's argument, leaving v. 10 syntactically incomplete. The sense of v. 10 finds its continuation in v. 12: 'it was said to her [that is, Rebekah, 'when she conceived'; v. 10] that 'The greater shall serve the lesser.'" The beginning of verse 11 describes the circumstances in which this prophetic word was spoken to Rebekah. The awkwardness of the syntax reflects Paul's concern to emphasize that there was nothing within the persons of Jacob and Esau that could have been the basis for God's choice of the one over the other.

Technically, Esau was born slightly ahead of Jacob, but God purposely disregarded that fact, telling their mother that contrary to the custom of those days, 'the older will serve the younger' (cp. Gen. 25:23).

b) Quotation of Malachi 1:2-3 (9:13)

¹³As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'

Paul's quotation of Malachi 1:2-3, introduced with one of Paul's favorite formulas ('just as it is written'), restates v. 12 and expands on it by making clear that the contrasting destinies of Jacob

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and Esau were not simply seen in advance by God but were also caused by Him. Jacob's preeminence was the result of God's love for him; Esau's servitude was the result of God's 'hate' for him.

God's choice went beyond the individuals to nations. We know this because the context of the quotation from Malachi 1:2, 3 refers to the descendants of Jacob (the Jews) and of Esau (the Edomites) who spent long periods in bondage to the Jews. The selection of Jacob individually and the Israelites corporately was solely God's sovereign choice.

In addition to denoting individual persons, both the names 'Jacob' and 'Esau' are also used in the OT to designate the peoples, or nations, descended from each of them – Israel and Edom. However, Paul is thinking mainly of Jacob and Esau as individuals rather than as nations and in terms of their own personal relationship to the promise of God rather than of their roles in carrying out God's plan. The nations denoted by these names, we must remember, have come into existence in and through the individuals who first bore those names. In a context in which Paul begins speaking rather clearly about the individuals rather than the nations, we should not be surprised that he would apply a text that spoke of the nations to the individuals who founded an, in a sense 'embodied' them. It is not the issue of how God uses different individuals or nations in accomplishing His purposes that is Paul's concern, but which individuals, and on what basis, belong to God's covenant people. This matter of 'belong to God's covenant people' is the bridge that connects Paul's appeal to the patriarchs to his own concerns. Paul appeals to OT history to establish a principle about the way in which God brings into being His own people. He is arguing that God in His own day is bringing into being a covenant people in the same way that He did in the days of the patriarchs; by choosing some and rejecting others. So, Paul will make clear later in this text, some Jews are called by God to be part of His people (vv. 24-29), while others have, for the time being at least, been rejected.

What does Paul mean by asserting that God 'loved' Jacob but 'hated' (*μισῶσα, emisēsa*) Esau? The connection of this quotation with v. 12 suggests that God's love is the same as His election: God chose Jacob to inherit the blessings promised first to Abraham. God's 'hatred' of Esau is more difficult to interpret because Paul does not furnish us at this point with contextual clues. But the best approach is to define 'hatred' here by its opposite, 'love.' If God's love of Jacob consists in His choosing Jacob to be the 'seed' who would inherit the blessings promised to Abraham, then God's hatred of Esau is best understood to refer to God's decision not to bestow this privilege on Esau. It might best be translated 'reject.' 'Love' and 'hate' are not here, then, emotions that God feels but actions that He carries out.

How do we deal with Paul's words? We have to be careful to distinguish between the various ways the Bible refers to the love of God. The Bible speaks of God's universal love, that is, the love that He has for all people. The first has to do with God's *love of benevolence*. The word 'benevolence' comes from the prefix *bene-*, which means 'good' or 'well,' and the word *vōlens*, 'will,' so *benevolence* means 'good will.' God has a basic attitude of goodwill to all His creatures, and that posture or attitude of good is shown by His love of beneficence. God's love of benevolence underlies God's giving good gifts to people indiscriminately.

There is, however, a special dimension of God's love, His *love of complacency*. It is a love that takes delight in the object of one's affection. This is the love the Father has for the Son. Christ is the beloved, but the Father, in pouring out His love of complacency upon His only begotten

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Son, extends that love to all who are in Christ Jesus. Our adoption includes us in that special, redemptive love of God in a way that those outside the fellowship of Christ do not share.

The fact that God loved Jacob and hated Esau does not indicate that God had a malicious sense of odium within His being against Esau. God was not filled with loathing toward him, although there are times in the Old Testament where that kind of loathing is attributed to God against evildoers and impenitent people. Here we are seeing a love-hate contrast, which is intended to communicate the truth that those who receive only God's benevolent love might consider it hatred when compared to God's complacent love, because His benevolent love is such a lower degree of love. Jesus spoke similarly in Luke 14:26.

The point Paul is making is, God has not failed because Israel has failed, because true Israel (true believers) have always come to God through His sovereign choice. God could have chosen Esau and rejected Jacob if He wanted. If you know anything about those two scoundrels, the marvel is not God's rejection of Esau, but in His choice of Jacob. God has not failed!

4. Summary on Election

a) *Moo*

This passage gives strong exegetical support to a traditional Calvinistic interpretation of God's election: God chooses those who will be saved on the basis of His own will and not on the basis of anything – works or faith, whether foreseen or not – in those human beings so chosen. Attempts to avoid this theological conclusion, whether by leaving room for human faith in v. 12 or by restricting the issues to the roles of nations in salvation history, are unsuccessful. But if we exclude faith as the basis for God's choice here, what becomes of Paul's strenuous defense of faith as the means of justification in Rom. 3:21-4:25 and again in the following section of the letter, 9:30-10:21? It is precisely in an attempt to do justice to these texts that many interpreters insist on finding room for faith in this text also: God's choice, they argue, is a choice to bestow His salvation on those who believe. Faith, then, in this traditional Arminian perspective, becomes the basis for God's choice.

However, the introduction into this text of *any* basis for God's election outside of God Himself defies both the language and the logic of what Paul has written. The only logical possibility, then, would seem to be to reverse the relationship between God's choosing and faith; as Augustine stated it: 'God does not choose us because we believe, but that we may believe.' This way of putting the matter seems generally to be justified by this passage and by the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. But it comes perilously close to trivializing human faith: something that many texts in Romans and in the rest of the NT simply will not allow us to do. We need, perhaps, to be more cautious in our formulations and to insist on the absolute cruciality and meaningfulness of the human decision to believe at the same time as we rightly make God's choosing of us ultimately basic.

At stake in all this, as Paul makes clear in 11:5-7, a text that takes up the argument of these verses, is the grace of God. Paul rules out any human claim on God as a violation of His grace. But by making the human decision to believe the crucial point of distinction between those who are saved and those who are not (the Arminian view), and thus making God's election a response to human choice, this perspective seems to minimize Paul's insistence that election to salvation is itself an act of God's grace (cp. 11:5); a decision He makes freely and without the compulsion of any influence outside Himself.

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b) Sproul

In this example, the doctrine of prescience is not only denied, dear friends, but it is demolished. The apostle dusts off the spot where it stood, because he addresses unambiguously the very concept that lies at the heart of the prescient view of predestination. The apostle guides us to look at the two unborn children Jacob and Esau. They were not only brothers; they were also twins. They had the same environmental background the same mother, father, and birthday. Paul reminds the reader of God's decree that the elder should serve the younger and that this decree was made before either boy was born. It is manifestly obvious that if these two boys were the subject of divine election then their election had been settled before they were born.

Paul uses the words 'purpose' and 'calls.' In both instances he is referring to the one who elects. The decree came before the boys were born, before they had done any good or evil, to make certain that the purpose of God according to election might stand. Their election was based not on what the boys would do but on what God does. The decree was issued according to the purpose of God so that His purpose would be exalted and established. His purpose is the ground of election.

Our election is never found in us (cp. v. 16). The prescient advocates say that in the final analysis our election is rooted in some work we do, but election would be conditional if we had to meet a condition in order for God to elect us. A conditional election flies in the face of the very point the apostle is laboring to make. Inevitably discussions of predestination come down to the free will of the creature, but bringing the notion of free will to this text is humanistic. The idea of a human will not enslaved by sin is an unbiblical understanding. At the heart of this text is indeed a profound affirmation of free will. It teaches that our salvation rests ultimately and eternally on free will, but it is not our free will; it is God's. It is the free will of the Creator, the Redeemer, who, in His sovereign grace, pours His mercy out upon those He chooses. In this case, God distinguishes between Jacob and Esau, the younger and the elder.

B. The Justice of God in Election (Romans 9:14-18)

Verses 14-23 are a detour from the main road of Paul's argument. Paul takes this detour because he knows that his insistence on God's initiative in determining who should be saved and who rejected (see vv. 10-13 especially) will meet with questions and objections. Appropriately, therefore, Paul reverts to the diatribe style, with its question-and-answer format and references to a dialogue partner, that he has utilized earlier in the letter (see 2:1-3:8; 3:27-31; 6-7). While Paul himself formulates these questions in order to carry on his argument, they undoubtedly represent objections that Paul has heard frequently during his ministry. Indeed, these questions state the inevitable human response to an insistence on the sovereignty of God in salvation; if God decides apart from anything in the human being whom He will choose and whom He will reject (v. 13), how can He still be 'righteous' (v. 14) – and how can He blame people if they reject Him (v. 19)? Paul responds to the first question with citations of and comments on Scripture (vv. 15-18) and to the second with a series of rhetorical questions (vv. 20-23).

Paul does not attempt to show how God's choice of human beings for salvation fits with their own 'choosing' of God in faith. Quite the contrary: rather than compromising the apparent absolute and unqualified nature of God's election, he reasserts it in even stronger terms. God not only has mercy on whomever He wants, He also hardens whomever He wants (v. 19). Many commentators are troubled by Paul's apparent disregard for human choice and responsibility.

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Paul does not provide a logically compelling resolution of the two strands of his teaching – God, by His own sovereign choice, elects human beings to salvation; human beings, by a responsible choice of their will, must believe in order to be saved. But criticism of the apostle on this score is unfair. It is unfair, first, because Paul can accomplish his purpose – showing God to be just – without such a resolution. And it is unfair, second, because no resolution of this perennial paradox seems possible this side of heaven.

1. Is God Unjust? (9:14)

¹⁴*What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!*

The opening question – ‘What then shall we say?’ – is typical of the questions Paul uses at several points in Romans to advance his argument. At some points, such questions introduce clarifications of Paul’s teaching (e.g., 6:1; 7:7). Here, however, it introduces a defense of his teaching, for the following question embodies and accusation: if God on the basis of nothing but His own choice (v. 12) determines who is to be saved and who rejected (v. 13), then there is ‘unrighteousness with God.’ The criticism Paul raises is that, in choosing and rejecting individuals apart from their own merits or faith, God has acted ‘against what is right’ (*adikia*). At this point, Paul simply rejects the charge about God’s unrighteousness with his characteristic ‘By no means!’

‘If, as you say, God chose Isaac, but not Ishmael, Jacob but not Esau, this can only mean that God is *unrighteous*.’ Here Paul has anticipated the next question from his imagined interrogators. The barb in the question is the word, ‘unrighteous’ (*adikia*), which – they infer – Paul must be saying about God’s choice of one but not another. We remember that in Paul’s gospel the ‘righteousness’ (*dikaioῦnē*) of God is given to those who believe in Christ (see 1:17). Clearly they are laying a verbal trap for him. He preaches ‘righteousness’ but is saying, in effect, that God is ‘unrighteous.’

The apostle does what any good teacher does, particularly one steeped in the rigors of debate; he anticipates the reaction of his students or opponents. Paul anticipates the point of tension, the argument, in what he is teaching about the sovereignty of God in election, and he raises a rhetorical question. The word translated ‘unrighteousness’ comes from the Greek word *adikia*. When a word is prefaced with that simple letter, *a*, it is a negation of the root. The root of *adikia* is *dikaio*, which means ‘righteous’ or ‘just.’ Paul is using the term that defines injustice or unrighteousness.

Why would Paul raise a question like this one? Words like *injustice* and *unrighteousness* simply do not belong as predicates of God’s character. Paul raises a rhetorical question with an unthinkable answer, but why does he raise it? He is anticipating a response to his teaching on the sovereignty of God in election, which he has been setting forth since chapter 8. As soon as Paul makes the radical statement about Jacob and Esau, he can hear the hisses and boos in the gallery: ‘That’s not fair!’ It certainly does seem unfair if, for nothing found in Jacob or Esau, God chooses one over the other. The fact that it seems unfair is a chief reason why Christians kick against this doctrine. There are two principle objections in the Christian community—never mind the pagan community—to the doctrine of election. It seems to dispense with any significance to the free will of man, and, even more importantly, it seems to cast a shadow on the integrity of God. The doctrine seems to make God arbitrary, whimsical, and capricious, and, even worse, it seems to show a shadowy side of God’s character, one that indicates that even He

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is infected by sin in the sense of being unjust or unrighteous. Here in Romans 9 Paul anticipates accusations because the doctrine provokes that kind of response from his audience.

The question behind this paragraph is a question of God's fairness. If He only chose some to be the heirs of promise, and not others, people will say He is unfair. The natural human response is to assert that God was unjustly arbitrary in choosing one over the other long before they would have opportunity to trust or reject Him or to be obedient or disobedient. That natural response, however, is tantamount to saying that there is 'injustice with God.' So Paul asks rhetorically if we have a right to accuse God of being unjust. That accusation has been raised throughout the history of the church and is still heard today when God's election and predestination are proclaimed. How can God elect one person and reject another before they are even born? Those doctrines, it is claimed, could not possibly characterize a God who is truly just and righteous. To the saved but ignorant or immature mind, God simply could not do such a thing, and to the unsaved mind, a god like that would not be worthy of recognition, much less worship.

Phillips renders this question: 'Do we conclude that God is monstrously unfair? Never!' At first it appears that Paul does not really answer the question but simply says it is impossible for God to do anything unjust. But the answer is sufficient. Luther comments, 'Why, then should man complain that God acts unjustly, when this is impossible? Or, could it be possible that God is not God?' If we say God cannot be fair and be a God who elects, we show a faulty concept of God. The fact is, God is perfect. Perfect in knowledge, wisdom, power, presence, faithfulness, goodness, justice, mercy, grace, love, and holiness. Therefore, He is perfect in His choices. God does not answer to anyone, is not responsible to anyone. He is totally, absolutely sovereign.

In light of such human objections and conjectures, Paul proceeds to defend God's person. 'May it never be!' he declares, using the strongest Greek negative (*mē genoito*, which he employs some ten times in this epistle. The idea is that of 'No, no, a thousand times, no!' The very idea that God could be unjust or unrighteous to the slightest degree is blasphemy. Because God Himself is the measure of righteousness and justice, He has no capacity for unrighteousness or injustice.

Paul answers his rhetorical question: 'Certainly not!' Those strong words are translated in different ways such as 'By no means!' or 'God forbid!' The most accurate translation is 'May it never be!' In other words, no one can dispute the fact that in God is no unrighteousness, injustice, or iniquity, though indeed it may seem that way initially.

2. Example 3: Mercy with Moses (9:15-16)

a) Quotation of Exodus 33:19b (9:15)

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.'*

The 'for' (*γὰρ, gar*) introducing this verse shows that Paul is not content simply to reject the accusation that God is unrighteous; he will also explain why that rejection is justified. The first part of Paul's explanation uses Scripture to show that God's unconstrained decision to choose Jacob and reject Esau was no isolated case but reflects God's very own nature (vv. 15 and 17). Continuing the trend of this passage (see vv. 7, 9, 12, and 13), Paul cites OT texts in which God Himself speaks. Such texts constitute the most important evidence we can have about God's essence and ways of acting.

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The context of this quote took place on Mt. Sinai after Moses had made intercession for his people's sin in making the golden calf and then asked God to show him His glory. 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion' means that God's mercy and compassion cannot be subject to any cause outside His free grace. God had mercy on the Israelites (not destroying them for their idolatry), not because they deserved it, but simply because He chose to be merciful.

Because all men are sinful and deserve God's condemnation, no person is wronged or treated unjustly if God chooses to condemn him. That is justice. His mercy toward any person is purely by His grace. 'Mercy' and 'compassion' are essentially synonymous, but 'mercy' refers primarily to action, whereas 'compassion' refers more to the feeling or disposition behind that action.

Paul finds in God's words to Moses (Ex. 33:19b) a revelation of one of God's basic characteristics: His freedom to bestow mercy on whomever He chooses. It is against this ultimate standard, not the penultimate standard of God's covenant with Israel, that God's 'righteousness' must be measured. Paul's reference to Moses reinforces the point, for it is to the mediator of the covenant himself that God reveals His freedom in mercy.

Paul reminds us of the absolute sovereignty of grace. Obviously if God is not sovereign, then He is not God. To be God is to be sovereign. When we consider divine sovereignty, we generally look at it in three specific domains. The first domain of God's sovereignty is the universe, which He governs. God, who made the universe, called it into being from nothing by the sheer power of His command. He exercises His sovereign authority over the stars, the floods, and the rivers; He exercises it in history over all things. The second domain in which God's sovereignty reigns is law. God has the sovereign right to legislate the manner of behavior and response that His creatures should render to Him. If you have the slightest understanding of the Christian faith, you certainly know that God has the authority to command you to do what He says is right.

Most Christians hold to God's sovereignty over nature and law, but when it comes to the third domain—the sovereignty of God's disposition of grace—90 percent get off the train. To them, God is not sovereign in His disposition of grace because if He were, He would show the same mercy to everyone. Scripture, however, paints a different picture of God's exercise of grace: 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.' How can God say that and still be just? He can, because He is exercising mercy upon sinners. No sinner has the right to say with impunity, 'God, you owe me grace.' If grace is owed, it is not grace. The very essence of grace is its voluntary character. God reserves to Himself the sovereign, absolute right to give grace to some and withhold that grace from others.

God in His sovereign disposition of grace interrupts our life while we are alienated from Him, dead in sins and trespasses, and the Holy Spirit comes and quickens us from death to life and changes the disposition of our heart. What Jacob got was grace; but what Esau got was not injustice. God withheld His mercy from Esau—mercy to which Esau had no claim—but the withholding was not an act of injustice on God's part. Jacob got mercy; Esau got justice. The elect get grace; the non-elect get justice. Nobody gets injustice. We have to hold on to that point with all our might, and Paul is laboring for that. 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.' God does not have to have mercy on everybody. God called Abraham out of paganism, out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and made him a covenant promise, not because Abraham had done any

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good thing but so that the purposes of God, according to His grace might stand. God did it for Abraham, but He did not do that for Hammurabi. If we read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, we see that God does not treat everybody the same way. If He did, we would all have the same place in hell, but He exercises mercy to some so that the glory of His purposes may be known.

b) Principle (9:16)

¹⁶*So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*

Paul now spells out the conclusion ('therefore') he wants to draw from this quotation. The ambiguity of the original does not make clear the subject of the sentence ('it'). We might substitute 'salvation' or 'God's purpose in election' (cp. v. 11), but the connection with v. 15 suggests rather 'God's bestowal of mercy.' In keeping with a popular view of this passage as a whole, many commentators think that the 'mercy' involved here is God's mercy in choosing different persons or nations in the outworking of His historical plan. But, as we have seen earlier, Paul's use of OT examples of God's choosing and rejecting develop a principle that he applies to the salvation of individual Jews and Gentiles in his own day (see 9:3, 6a, 22-23, 24). Here, the principle Paul formulates moves beyond the positive assertion of v. 15 – God's bestowal of mercy has its origin in His will to be merciful – to its negative corollary – God's mercy does not, then, depend on human 'willing' or 'running.' The former denotes one's inner desire, purpose, or readiness to do something; the latter the actual execution of that desire. Together, then, they sum up the total of man's capacity.

It is not man's choice or pursuit but God who initiates mercy for the sinner. Salvation is never initiated by human choice or merited by zealous human effort. It always begins in God's sovereign, gracious, and eternal will. Those who receive God's mercy receive it solely by His grace. Ishmael desired the blessing but failed to receive it. Esau ran for the blessing, as it were, but also failed to receive it (see Gen. 27).

How can we look at this text closely and still say, 'It really is of him who wills and him who runs. My free will is the basis of my salvation.' No, it is God's free will. Perhaps you have heard it said that God's sovereignty ends where human free will begins. It is blasphemy, of course, because if God's sovereignty is limited by our free will, then we are sovereign. We do have free will. We have the ability to choose what we want to be. That is true freedom, but it is always and everywhere limited by God's sovereignty. Any time man's free will bumps up against God's free will, who wins? It is no contest? It is God's good pleasure to save His elect that He may show forth His grace in salvation.

If you are hanging on to your semi-Pelagian views of election, get rid of them. Your theology is undermining the sovereignty of God, His grace, and the sweetness of His mercy. We do that when we want to exalt our decisions above His, and it is the very essence of sin. We have to bow before Him and acquiesce not only to the sovereignty of His grace but to the *goodness* of the sovereignty of His grace.

3. Example 4: Hardening of Pharaoh (9:17-18)

a) Quotation of Exodus 9:16 (9:17)

¹⁷*For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'*

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In vv. 15-16 Paul reiterates and expands the positive side of God's sovereignty in election that he alluded to in vv. 10-13 ('Jacob I have loved'). Now Paul will do the same with respect to the 'negative' side ('Esau I have rejected'). Verses 17-18 parallel v. 15-16: Paul begins by citing Scripture and then states a principle drawn from it. The 'for' (*γὰρ, gar*) introducing v. 17 may, then, function as does its counterpart in v. 15 and indicate that vv. 17-18 contain a second reason to reject the accusation that God is unjust. Verses 17-18 can hardly be an explanation of God's mercy in v. 16 since the 'hardening' that Paul illustrates in v. 17 is, according to v. 18, antithetical to 'mercy.' Verses 17-18 probably relate mainly to v. 14, although there may be a secondary connection with v. 16 as Paul develops from another side the primacy of God's will that v. 16 implies.

The quoted words are again from Exodus, from the Lord's instructions to Moses about what he is to say to Pharaoh on the sixth occasion that Moses and Aaron are told to go before the Egyptian ruler to demand the release of the people of Israel (Ex. 9:16). Paul's wording, 'I have raised you up,' differs from both the standard Greek LXX text and the Hebrew MT. It seems reasonable to conclude that Paul has deliberately accentuated God's initiative in the process. *Exegeirō* ('raised...up') carries the idea of bring forward or lifting up and was used of the rise of historical figures to positions of prominence. The Lord of all history put Pharaoh into a position of great authority to demonstrate His far greater divine power and authority that would bring glory to His 'name...throughout the whole earth.'

In this case, it is not enough to say that God permits Pharaoh to sin. It is not enough to say that God's will is involved only so far as God stayed out of the picture altogether and left Pharaoh to his own devices. God not only has allowed Pharaoh to continue in willful disobedience, but He has also raised him up. A better way to translate that text is this way: 'I have appointed you to this task.' God put Pharaoh in a position of power for the purpose of showing His own power.

The verb 'raise up' probably, then, has the connotation 'appoint to a significant role in salvation history.' Of particular importance in the quotation is the purpose of God's raising Pharaoh up. Indeed, the purpose clause is probably the reason that Paul has cited this particular text since its lack of explicit reference to Pharaoh's 'hardening' makes it less suitable than others as a preparation for Paul's conclusion in v. 18. Paul wants to make clear that even God's 'negative' actions, such as the hardening of Pharaoh, serve a positive purpose (a point Paul will develop further in vv. 22-23). And this positive purpose is the greatest imaginable: the demonstration of God's power and the wider proclamation of God's name. In Pharaoh's day, the plagues on the land of Egypt and the deliverance of Israel through the 'Sea of Reeds,' made necessary by Pharaoh's hardened heart, accomplished this purpose (see Jos. 2:10). In Paul's day, he implies, the hardening that has come upon a 'part of Israel' (see 11:5-7, 25) has likewise led to the name of God being 'proclaimed in all the earth' through the mission to the Gentiles.

Pharaoh deserved death, but God did not strike him down. Rather, He allowed him to continue to live and reign so that God could demonstrate His power in the repeated defeats of Pharaoh. Pharaoh became an international illustration of God's supremacy.

b) Principle (9:18)

¹⁸*So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.*

Anyone who knows the Exodus story would understand that God 'raised up' Pharaoh with a negative rather than a positive purpose. By resisting God's will to deliver His people from bondage, Pharaoh caused that deliverance to assume a more spectacular aspect than it would

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have otherwise. Pharaoh's resistance to God's purpose is caused, according to Ex. 4-14, by his 'hardness' of heart. It is this concept that connects vv. 17 and 18, as Paul now states a principle of God's acting that Pharaoh's experience serves to illustrate: God hardens 'whomever He wishes.' But Paul expands this principle to reiterate God's freedom in bestowing mercy as well. This shows that v. 18 embodies a conclusion drawn from all of vv. 15-17. As God's self-revelation to Moses demonstrates that He is a God who freely bestows mercy on 'whomever He wishes,' so God's words to Pharaoh reveal that He is at the same time a God who hardens 'whomever He wishes.'

The mighty act of God in delivering His people from Egypt demonstrated two great truths. He delivered Israel to exhibit His sovereign 'mercy on [those] whom He desires,' and He raised up and destroyed Pharaoh to exhibit the corollary truth that 'He hardens' those 'whom He desires.' Only His divine desire determines which it will be. 'Hardens' translates *sklērunō*, which literally means to make hard and metaphorically means to render stubborn and obstinate. The Exodus account of Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh speaks ten times of God's hardening that rulers heart (see, e.g., Ex. 4:21; 7:3, 13). That same passage also informs us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (see, e.g., Ex. 8:32; 9:34), confirming God's act by his own. Such passages point up the humanly irreconcilable tension between God's sovereignty and man's will.

The term 'harden' (*sklērunō*) occurs 14 times in Exodus 4-14, where it has the connotation 'make spiritually insensitive.' God's hardening, then, is an action that renders a person insensitive to God and His word and that, if not reverse, culminates in eternal damnation. We have seen that Paul has insisted that God bestows His mercy on His own initiative, apart from anything that a person is or does (v. 16). The strict parallelism in this verse suggests that the same is true of God's hardening: as He has mercy on 'whomever He wishes,' so He hardens 'whomever He wishes.' However, many scholars deny that this is the case. They point particularly to Ex. 4-14, where the first reference to God's hardening of Pharaoh (Ex. 9:12) comes only after references to Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart (8:11, 28).

Paul mentions that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but does not take time to indicate the other side of the coin—that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. (The Exodus account reveals both.) In truth, God gave Pharaoh opportunity to repent, but Pharaoh resisted God and therefore hardened himself to divine rule. Sunlight melts ice but hardens clay (boiling water hardens the egg but softens the potato). God was not unrighteous with Pharaoh. He gave him repeated opportunities to believe. The point is, God is sovereign and acts according to His own will and purposes. He is perfectly just, for He is God.

First, Ex. 4-14 does not clearly indicate that Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart was the basis for God's hardening; in fact, it may well imply that Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart was the result of God's prior act of hardening. Second, Paul's 'whomever He wishes,' shows that God's decision to harden is His alone to make and is not constrained by any consideration having to do with a person's status or actions. Third, if Paul had in fact wanted his readers to assume that God's hardening was based on a person's self-hardening, we would have expected him to make this clear in response to the objection in v. 19. What more natural response to the objection that God is unfair in 'finding fault' with a person than to make clear that God's hardening is based on a person's own prior action?

On the surface, it sounds once again as though there is a balance, a symmetry, in which God melts the hearts of the elect and calcifies the hearts of the reprobate. The Bible does say, not

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only here but throughout the exodus account, that God repeatedly hardens the heart of Pharaoh. God does not have to create any new evil in the human heart. To make someone more wicked than he already is, God need only remove His constraints. One of the great mercies God gives us is keeping us from being as sinful as we possibly could be. From Genesis to Revelation we see that God's abandoning a sinner to wickedness is not an act of unrighteousness on His part; it is a manifestation of His perfect justice. It is as if He is saying, 'You want to sin? Be my guest. I am not going to strive with you anymore. I am going to take the wraps off. I am going to loosen the leash and let you do what you want, because I know that the desires of your hearts are only wicked continually.'

Being given over to sin is itself a judgment on sin—that is a biblical principle. It presupposes an existing sinful condition. God did not look around Egypt for somebody to appoint to resist Moses and in the process stumble upon the poor, innocent, righteous young man Pharaoh. He hardened a man who was already hard. It is perfect justice for God to give an evil one over to evil.

The 'hardening' Paul portrays here, then, is a sovereign act of God that is not *caused* by anything in those individuals who are hardened. And 9:22-23 and 11:7 suggest that the outcome of hardening is damnation. It seems, then, that this text, in its context, provides important exegetical support for the controversial doctrine of 'double predestination': just as God decides, on the basis of nothing but His sovereign pleasure, to bestow His grace and so save some individuals, so He also decides, on the basis of nothing but His own sovereign pleasure, to pass over others and so damn them. The doctrine of double predestination has its roots in Augustine and was taught by some early medieval theologians, but it was given a classic expression in the theology of Calvin and (even more forthrightly) in the teaching of his theological descendants.

4. Summary on Predestination

a) *MacArthur*

Two comments must be made. First, Paul has introduced the example of God's dealings with Pharaoh to prepare the way for God's more recent dealings with Israel herself. As God 'demonstrated His power' in Pharaoh so that the name of God might be made known through Israel among the Gentile nations, so God has 'made known His power' in wrath upon Israel so that the salvation of God might come to the Gentiles. Disobedient Pharaoh is a paradigm for disobedient Israel, both of whom, however, have been so appointed by God for His greater glory. Second, while God *being God* has the right to raise up a Pharaoh and a nation for His purposes, this does not relieve either Pharaoh or Israel from their moral responsibility. Pharaoh behaved wickedly despite many opportunities to act rightly. Israel has acted willfully in her rejection of her king the Messiah Jesus. Both will be judged by their 'works' (see 2:6-11).

b) *Moo*

No doctrine stimulates more negative reaction and consternation than this one. Some degree of such reaction is probably inevitable, for it flies in the face of our own common perceptions of both human freedom and God's justice. And vv. 19-23 show that Paul was himself very familiar with this reaction. Yet, without pretending that it solves all our problems, we must recognize that God's hardening is an act directed against human beings who are already in rebellion against God's righteous rule. God's hardening does not, then *cause* spiritual insensitivity to the things of God; it maintains people in the state of sin that already characterizes them. This does not mean

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that God's decision about whom to harden is based on a particular degree of sinfulness within certain human beings; He hardens 'whomever He chooses.' But it is imperative that we maintain side-by-side the complementary truths that: 1) God hardens whomever He chooses; and 2) human beings, because of sin are responsible for their ultimate condemnation. Thus, God's bestowing of mercy and His hardening are not equivalent acts. God's mercy is given to those who do not deserve it; His hardening affects those who have already by their sin deserved condemnation.

c) Sproul

John Calvin said that the doctrine of election is one of the most difficult doctrines of sacred Scripture and must be handled with care, caution, tenderness, and patience among those who struggle with it, but it should not be neglected. The doctrine comes from the Word of God, and even though we struggle with it, we must not sweep it under the rug; we must deal with it, albeit carefully.

I am asked frequently whether I believe in double predestination. Here is where we face what I have to call 'double or nothing.' If some of humanity is elect, then others are non-elect. The non-elect are those whom we call the reprobate. Unless we are universalists, there is no way to avoid the idea of a double aspect to divine predestination. Of course predestination is double. There is election and reprobation. We cannot avoid that fact with mental gymnastics. However, once we affirm double predestination, we have to ask what kind of double predestination we affirm. Even within the communion of Reformed theology there is ongoing debate about that very question. Most agree that predestination is double; the debate is over how to understand the double aspect.

One view, sometimes called hyper-Calvinism, teaches a symmetrical view of predestination, or equal ultimacy. A symmetrical view of double predestination holds that in the case of the elect, God decreed their election from eternity and in the fullness of time intervenes in their lives and creates saving faith in their hearts by His grace. In a symmetrical manner, the reprobate are doomed from eternity, and God in the fullness of time intrudes into their lives and creates fresh evil in their souls, ensuring their ultimate reprobation and damnation. This symmetrical view believes that God works grace by direct intrusion, and He works hardening by crating evil in the reprobate in an equal manner. However, that is not the orthodox Reformed view of double predestination.

A positive-negative distinction in predestination is this: in the case of the elect, God positively intervenes in their lives to rescue them from their corrupt condition. The Holy Spirit changes their hearts of stone to hearts alive to the things of God. That is His positive intervention. In the case of the reprobate, God works negatively insofar as He passes over them. He leaves them to their own devices, but He does not intrude in their lives to create fresh evil. In the mass of fallen humanity, some receive the saving grace of God; God intervenes to rescue them from their sinful condition. He passes over the remainder. Those whom He passes over are not elect; they are reprobate. They are judged because of the evil already present in them.

For next time: Read Romans 9:19-33.