

“THE BLESSINGS OF ISRAEL” (Romans 9:1-5)

Romans 9 sets a very different tone from Romans 8. He goes from the heights of glory to the heights of sorrow. However, this is no mere appendix to the major doctrinal part of Romans from Chapters 1-8. Romans 9 addresses possible questions raised in Romans 8.

Many Jews reading how Paul argued that justification is tied up in the immutable counsel of God would still have many objections. They point out that the case of Israel refutes Paul’s argument. For if the promises of salvation were first given to Israel, why is it that so many Jews are not Christians? They point out that if nothing can separate those who have been elected and predestinated from the love of God, then how come Israel, the chosen nation, do not accept Paul’s gospel?

If Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and He was a Jew, then why do the majority of Jews reject Him? Has God now cast away His people? Has He nullified His promises to the Israel? Surely this proves that God has been unfaithful to His promises to glorify those who He predestinated or Jesus is not the real Messiah? As the Jews received the Law, the Covenants, the promises etc, then why is it the church Gentile-dominated? As Lewis Johnson summarises, “either Paul’s gospel is true and the promises have been nullified, or the promises are true and Paul’s gospel is false and Christ is an imposter.”

These objections will have to be faced directly. Paul will do so by demolishing the arguments of his opponents in a reasoned theodicy that vindicates the character and ways of God. As he does so, the apostle will prove that God’s purpose throughout history is absolute, consistent, and immutable. Paul will show conclusively that the question of the rejection of Jesus Christ by many in Israel, rather than contradict Romans 8 is a further illustration of the truths of that chapter. The failure by many Jews to embrace Jesus Christ was due to spiritual pride and self-sufficiency. It was not a failure on the promises of God.

Paul also is cognisant that his enemies, even in the church, slandered his reputation by saying he does not care about the Jews. In fact they said he was a traitor to his race and not a real apostle. However, Paul will refute all of this by giving us an insight in this section into his burden for his people.

(1) BURDEN OF PAUL (v1-3)

Like his Master, the apostle Paul was frequently misunderstood and misrepresented by his Jewish countrymen. Even the Jewish believers were guilty of this. In Acts 21:21 we read that the leaders of the Jerusalem Church told Paul of common untrue criticisms leveled against him, “*And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.*”

Those outside the church regarded him as a traitor for his associations with the Gentiles and as a heretic for being the foremost proponent of the Gospel of the crucified peasant, Jesus of Nazareth.

From within the church we read of Jewish believers attacking his apostleship and teaching (cf. Acts 15:1; Galatians 1:6-9; 2:4-5; 3:1; 4:17; 5:10, 12; 6:12-13). Some said he was not a real apostle like the other 12 who were with Christ from the beginning. Probably some even argued that he was trying to usurp the powers and positions of the others by building a greater following amongst the Gentiles. Even those who accepted that he should preach to Gentiles regarded him as going too far. Snide remarks were likely made that, as he was born in Tarsus, this led him to be too tolerant. Others may

have argued that he was indifferent towards the Jews because of bitterness due to his vicious persecutions they waged against him.

Paul is going to nail all these lies in these first 5 verses to the saints at Rome, who may have heard many of these slanders and rumours. He knows the truth of the saying “No one cares how much you know till they know how much you care.” Paul will reveal his true heart for his unbelieving people. In v1, Paul uses the name of Christ as an oath to emphasise his sincerity about his heart for Israel, “*I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost.*”

Paul wants the saints at Rome to know that his preaching to the Gentiles is not motivated by any malice toward his Jewish kinsfolk. It was Paul who stated in Romans 1 that, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*” This was not just a sound bite, but Paul endeavoured to take the gospel first to the Jew in every city he entered. This can be seen consistently throughout the book of Acts.

Paul also mentions that his conscience is clear on this purpose. The conscience is independent of us and Paul has no residual guilt from being unfaithful in his labours to win his fellow Jews to Christ. When he speaks of their unbelief he is not speaking from a bitter or a harsh heart.

In v2 Paul reveals the depth of his burden for his countrymen. He says, “*I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.*” This expression “*great heaviness*” means “*bitter grief.*” It is one commonly used of persons mourning. The present continuous tense used here reflects that this was a continual burden that Paul carried throughout his ministry. Paul was not a passive observer while the Jews perished in their sin around him.

This continuous compassion for the lost is the Spirit of Christ, “*But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd*” (Matt. 9:36). All the great men and woman in church history have had a great burden for the lost around them.

This is not something that can be worked up but is the very heartbeat of the Master, “*Then Jesus beholding him **loved him**, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow Me*” (Mark 10:21). The founder of the China Inland Mission, James Hudson Taylor used to say, “If I had 1,000 lives, I’d give them all for China.” The great test of our spiritual condition today is are we burdened about the eternal state of our unsaved relatives, friends, and neighbours?

Now in v3, Paul will demonstrate just how deep was his love for the souls of his lost countrymen, “*For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*” The Greek scholar A T Robertson points out that the expression, “*I could wish that myself were accursed*” is an idiomatic imperfect “I was on the point of wishing.” Paul’s desire is that if were possible his longing is to demonstrate his love in an even more sacrificial way. This word “*accursed*” is the Greek word “*anathema*” which is the strongest form of curse as it means devoted to divine condemnation.

Paul is not teaching that he could be cursed in hell for the souls of the unbelieving Jews. In chapter 8 he has made clear that nothing can separate a justified believer from the love of Christ. So what Paul saying is that if it were possible he would be willing to separate himself eternally from the Christ in the torments of hell for the Jews Paul loves with all his heart. This is an incredible statement! Love doesn’t go any deeper than this! Remember how wickedly and cruelly the Jews had slandered and persecuted him.

Now, Paul was the greatest of theologians. No one understood doctrines such as election, predestination, and justification like this man. But Paul was no ivory tower theologian that was dead from the neck down. He takes no pleasure in condemning the

unbelieving Jews with his words. Theology is meant to fill our minds and our hearts. The great truths and doctrines that Paul believed profoundly moved his heart for the lost around him. Biblical truths are not to be studied like geometry or in a laboratory. They are meant to touch the depths of our heart.

Paul knew the OT intimately so doubtless he was aware of the parallel in his words here with that of Moses in Exodus 32:31-33. Of course such a request was impossible, as we can see from the Lord's reply to Moses. But it does reveal the depth of the love of Moses for his people.

(2) BLESSINGS OF ISRAEL (v4-5)

Paul then shows that far from despising or being indifferent to the Jews, he fully recognises and appreciates the great spiritual blessings or privileges they have. These advantages here made their rejection even worse. He now lists 8 wonderful blessings that they uniquely had:

(a) ADOPTION – Israel was a special nation. They alone were chosen by God, as He told Pharaoh, “*Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn*” (Exodus 4:22). This was a sovereign choice and not based upon any impressive external criteria of Israel (Deut. 7:6-7).

(b) GLORY – God had uniquely privileged Israel with special revelations of His divine glory. They had the pillar of cloud and fire during the 40 years in the wilderness. They saw the Shekinah glory in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and later in the temple (1 Kings 8:11).

(c) COVENANTS – Israel alone was given precious promises and covenantal pledges by God. No other nation has or ever will have these. Indeed, God made no covenants with the Gentiles. Abraham received the first great covenant in Genesis 12 which was further elaborated upon in Genesis 15, 17, and 22. There was also the great Davidic Covenant promising the eternal kingdom in 2 Samuel 7.

(d) SERVICE TO GOD - This refers to the entire sacrificial and ceremonial system entrusted to Israel by God. Within this were all the shadows and types that pointed to Christ thereby dramatically revealing the truths of the gospel.

(e) PROMISES – It was Israel that received these great Messianic promises. The Apostle Paul deals with these in great detail in Galatians 3.

(f) THE FATHERS – Israel was privileged to have not just one but a series of great patriarchs in their history – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They also had giants in the faith throughout their history such as Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Hannah, Samuel, Daniel etc.

(g) JESUS CHRIST – The Apostle climaxes this list with the greatest blessing the Jews possessed. They had the immeasurable privilege of having Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world to be born from a Jewish lineage. He grew up a Jew in the confines of Palestine, where He ministered amongst them. Christ testified of this truth as, “*Salvation is of the Jews.*” Israel truly lacked nothing as a nation. No other nation was blessed like this nation.

“THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD” (Romans 9:6-13)

In Romans 9, the apostle discusses some of the toughest questions that a man can contemplate about the actions and workings of God. However, when you come to a passage like this a number of things have to be kept in mind:

- (1) God is God and we are not. God alone has the right, as the Sovereign ruler of this universe, to do what He pleases. He does not need our advice as to how He rules this world.
- (2) The Apostle Paul does not apologise for what he says about predestination and election. He does not seek to avoid these great truths, but faces them honestly and with a submissive heart.
- (3) We should not consider the truths of this passage with our own presuppositions or pre-conceptions. Let us allow God to describe His character and His ways. We don't need to conform Him to our standards. He is the standard. Therefore, we must look to the Word of God alone to teach us what we need to know about God's sovereignty.
- (4) We must not presume that we can understand everything that is contemplated in the mind of God. Indeed, the Bible makes clear that there will be areas that we cannot grasp, *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isa. 55:8-9)
- (5) What the Holy Spirit places in Scripture we must take seriously and study carefully as *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”* We must not avoid it or dilute it just to make it more palatable to the ears of modern man.
- (6) This section of Romans is not some argument that Paul wants to win for the sake of academic debate. It was not written for theologians and seminary students to debate. Rather it flows from his great burden for the lost souls of his own countrymen. The doctrines of election and predestination should not diminish our love for souls but rather it should increase it, as we know that God is in control of the end and the means.

God's sovereignty is clearly revealed throughout the Scriptures. We may not fully understand it but we are required to believe it. Let me give a good definition of God's sovereignty:

God is the absolute Sovereign Ruler of this world independent of and unlimited by any person or any circumstance. He is sovereign over:

- (i) what happens**
- (ii) when it happens**
- (iii) how it happens**
- (iii) why it happens**

and even **(iv) what happens after it happens**. This is always true of all events in every culture, in every continent, and in every century. The Bible makes clear that God does not cause sin, but that He works through the sinful actions of men for His glory and purposes.

Notwithstanding, Paul's argument in Romans 9 is not primarily designed to systematically unfold the subject of predestination. In fact, what Paul is doing in Romans 9-11 is to deal with an objection to his teaching on justification by faith alone. This objection is based around the illustration of Israel.

In Romans 8 Paul showed the golden chain of redemption had five links – foreknow, predestinated, called, justified, and glorified. He used these to prove that our salvation is secure. Now, Paul's objectors accept that there is a doctrine of predestination. They believe that Israel is the chosen or elected nation, which they interpret it to mean that no Jew will go to hell. Certainly there is no way that God would select the accursed Gentiles over them.

So, they point out that there is a fatal flaw in Paul's system. As Israel are the elect nation that God foreknew in eternity past, then why is it that so many Jews reject justification by faith alone and, according to Paul, are accursed and cut off from Christ? Therefore, they argue Paul's golden chain of redemption with election leading invariably to glorification doesn't even match up to the test of history.

On the surface this is a powerful challenge, as the OT makes clear that Israel were God's elect and chosen nation with all the attendant covenants and promises. Therefore, if being elected by God in eternity past does not guarantee the salvation of a Jew, then what assurance and comfort has a Gentile Christian got based on the fact that they have been justified? Can we ever be sure that we will be glorified?

Furthermore, if the golden chain of redemption is rooted in the character, promises, and work of God alone, then Paul is teaching that the promises and character of God have failed. This is an objection that Paul will have to carefully and biblically refute.

In this section of v6-13, Paul states that God is always faithful to His promises and decrees. He will first state the principle in v6 and then brings out two devastating illustrations of proof from the sacred history of Judaism in v7-13. As he does so Paul will affirm in the clearest terms the doctrines of unconditional election and the sovereignty of God in salvation.

(1) PRINCIPLE OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (v6)

Paul makes it clear in principle that there is no way that God's promises can fail, "*Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect.*" Paul does not deny that the Jew has immense spiritual privileges (v4-5), but it is clear the failure to live up to them does not nullify the promises of God. The apostle wants his readers to grasp that God's promises have not failed in the past, are not failing today, and will not fail in the future.

Then in v6b, Paul gives the reason in a nutshell why the illustration of the history of the Jews does not overthrow this principle, "*For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.*" This argument is simply that the true Israel is not synonymous with the physical ethnic Israel. This true Israel is those Jews born not just by physical descent from Abraham, but were children of the promise by faith. So any Jew who rejected Jesus as Messiah did not prove that God was unfaithful to His promises. All he did by his rejection is to prove that he was not of the true elect of Israel.

This argument was briefly introduced by Paul himself in Romans 2:28-29. It is not Pauline in origin, as Jesus Christ made a similar distinction in John 8. Although, the

Master accepted these rebellious Jews were Abraham's children by physical descent, "*I know that ye are Abraham's seed*" (v37), He pointed out they were not truly Abraham's children by faith as, "*If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham*" (v39). Christ then points them to their real spiritual ancestry, "*Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do*" (v44).

The implications of Paul's thinking here is clear. Great spiritual privileges and ancestry do not guarantee you salvation. Esau had Jacob as his twin brother, Isaac as his father, and Abraham as his grandfather but still went to hell. Now, this truth should not have come as a surprise to the discerning Jewish reader of the OT. The principle of v6 explains the great apostasies of Israel. It also explains how men like Absalom, Jeroboam, and Ahab acted the way they did. Indeed, it explains why God had to send both Israel and then Judah into captivity.

The principle is relevant to Gentiles like us, as it explains why so many apostate children have come from Christian homes. It is a warning to every Christian parent that rearing children in a church environment and Christian home with all the attendant spiritual privileges and advantages does not guarantee household salvation.

(2) PROOF OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (v7-13)

Like any sound theologian, Paul will not merely state this principle of a people within a people in the Old Testament, but will then defend and support this statement in v7-13 from Scripture. We will see the wisdom of Paul in this, as he will meet the objecting Jew on what he considers his strongest ground – his ancestry to the Patriarchs and OT Scripture. He will simply unfold the divine inference from the truths that are found there.

(a) Isaac vs Ishmael

Paul's first line of proof that not all of the physical descendants of Abraham are the true Israel of the promises is the illustration of Isaac. He points out that, "*Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children.*" It was only "*in Isaac shall thy seed be called.*" This is because children like Ishmael are, "*the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God*" whereas children like Isaac are the recipients of the promise, "*but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.*"

Isaac is a good example as God sovereignly chose him to be the heir of this promise before he was even conceived (Gen. 17:19-21). Years later Isaac appropriated the promise by personal faith. However, this choice of Isaac by God was not Abraham's choice, as he desperately wanted Ishmael to be a recipient of God's salvation blessings, "*O that Ishmael might live before thee!*" (Gen. 17:18). Now, Ishmael was the firstborn and a physical child of Abraham, but he was not one of the, "*children of the promise.*" Indeed, Abraham later married a woman named Keturah and had six further sons. Yet only Isaac was the child of promise.

(b) Jacob vs Esau

The apostle Paul would be fully aware that some thinking Jews might well agree that Ishmael should not be the recipient of the promises, as he was the son of the handmaid Hagar. Whereas, the Jew could boast that he was descended from the lineage of the "full" wife Sarah through Isaac.

As a great apologist and teacher, Paul will anticipate this objection and demolish it in his second illustration drawn from the Patriarchs. This second witness will strengthen the evidential basis to the principle, which is what Jewish law required, "*at the*

mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established’ (Deut. 19:15). It is, therefore, not mere repetition. Paul moves on to the next generation and selects as his line of proof the biblical account of Jacob and Esau. A number of things should be noted about this:

- (i) Jacob and Esau were twins – they had the same mother and father.
- (ii) Esau was the firstborn. Indeed, he was his father Isaac’s preferred choice to receive the spiritual birthright.
- (iii) Esau was a wicked man but so was Jacob. God could not have chosen Jacob because he was good. Just read the Genesis account!

Note carefully how God chose Jacob to be heir of the promises of God, *“The elder shall serve the younger”* (v12). This would eventually lead this equally wicked man, Jacob to one day by faith embrace and persevere in Christ’s bestowed grace with its attendant privileges and blessings here and hereafter. God revealed to Rebekah that He sovereignly chose Jacob over Esau while they both were still in the womb (Gen. 25:23). Once God had made this decision no one or anything could frustrate His sovereign purpose. Isaac and Esau tried but the narrative shows how God overruled them. One eventually went his own way – the other went God’s way.

Now why did God make this choice to elect Jacob and not Esau? Was it triggered by God’s sovereign choice in eternity past or was it triggered by God’s knowledge of the choices and good works that the twins would make in time? The latter interpretation means that God made His choice on what man would choose to do, rather than on what God would do. Hence man is sovereign in salvation, as he called according to man’s will! But that is not what the Scripture teaches, *“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”* (v15-16).

Men have argued like this for centuries. But what saith the Scripture? That will be test. Let’s just let the Bible speak, *“For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth”* (v11). God’s sovereign effectual call of salvation was decreed before the birth of Esau and Jacob. So as they were not born, they could not have influenced the decision of God by their works. God is no mere passive spectator or reporter in the great chain of redemption.

Paul could not have made it any clearer. It is *“not of works, but of Him that calleth.”* And the reason, *“that the purpose of God according to election might stand.”* Now whether you understand or feel comfortable about the difficult implications of such a statement is not the point. Let’s accept that is what the Bible explicitly states and submit to that!

God’s promises did not fail for Ishmael or Esau. Both became the fathers of wicked and idolatrous nations. Ishmael and Esau were not the children of the promise but simply of the flesh. Likewise, God’s promises have not failed any Jew who rejects Jesus as the Messiah. They were not children of the promise either.

VERSE 13

Few verses have generated as much confusion as this verse 13, *“As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.”* A student once said to the theologian, Dr. Griffith Thomas that this verse troubled him. His problem he recounted was that he could not understand why God hated Esau. Thomas answered, “I am having a problem with that passage too, but mine is different. I do not understand why God loved Jacob.” That’s the right perspective and heart to look at a passage like this. God’s sovereign and unconditional election ought to produce gratitude, not presumption.

There are a number of things we need to keep in mind when we analyse such a verse:

(i) Esau deserved to go to hell. He was wicked, godless, and proud. Esau has no grounds for complaint, as he received the wages for his sin.

(ii) Jacob equally deserved to go to hell for his sins also. He does not come across as any more righteous or likeable in the Genesis account. Jacob as a slave of sin was not able to free himself by his own efforts. The only way he could be saved is by God extending mercy and grace. However, by extending grace to Jacob, God did no disservice to Esau who got what he deserved.

(iii) Ancestry makes no difference in salvation – both children came from the same father and mother.

(iv) Works make no difference in God's sovereign selection of one over the other.

The word "hated" here can mean "to dislike strongly or to love less." The best way to see this in this context is as a relative term meaning to love less. One writer explained it well,

Jesus used the same word in a similar way when He cautioned that a man must hate his father and mother if he would come to Christ (Luke 14:26). Obviously Jesus, who was an advocate of the Law (Exod. 20:12), was not encouraging "hate" in the usual sense of the word. But through a consecrated use of the hyperbole of antithesis, Jesus is saying that the love a man has for Christ ought to dwarf his love for his father to the extent that the latter would seem to be "hate" by comparison. Hatred in this sense is not absolute but relative to a higher choice. Therefore, God did not "hate" Esau in the conventional sense of the word. In fact, He greatly prospered and favored him (Gen. 27:38, 39, 40). Esau did receive earthly blessings, as he himself testified (Gen. 33:9.)

However, God's favor and blessing upon Jacob was so extensive that by comparison Esau would appear to be hated. The verse could be understood to mean that God has chosen Jacob to fulfill His elective purpose, but He has passed over Esau. Keep in mind that Esau rejected God. The divine rationale for this action is simply the elective purpose of God in Israel.

The two illustrations of Isaac and Jacob prove that God gives His salvation promises sovereignly and not biologically. Indeed, it would be terrible for us as Gentile Christians if God only saved Jews! It would also be disastrous for us if God had not elected us sovereignly for salvation. None of would get beyond Romans 3:20!

Finally, if God did not sovereignly foreknow, predestinate, call, and justify His elect people then we would have no assurance today that we will one day be glorified. But that is the beauty of sovereign election. It is, "*that the purpose of God according to election might stand*" (v11). God's sovereign election of His people is the only assured way of His purpose and plan coming to a perfect fulfillment.

“THE JUSTICE OF GOD” (Romans 9:14-33)

This is a difficult passage of Scripture to grasp, as we come face to face with some of the deepest truths about God. In v6-13 the apostle Paul made clear that God sovereignly chooses His elect people not on the basis of our spiritual privileges, ancestry or our good works. This provides a number of inferences and naturally raises a number of thorny questions in his reader’s mind.

These questions are based on objections seeking to attack the justice of God. Paul in v6-13 defended the faithfulness of God using OT Scripture and now he will show himself equally adept at defending the justice of God from the same Scripture. As he does so, Paul will take us into deep waters as he considers the balance of truth in Scripture in respect of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Although some people would prefer that unconditional election be not taught in Scripture, it is taught emphatically and repeatedly. To reject this doctrine is to reject the clear teaching of Scripture. Ironically many are content to accept that God passed over the fallen angels without offering them the gospel and has redeemed men. Yet they get angry with God over His sovereign programme of unconditional election for an elect group of humanity.

Here in v14-29 the apostle will anticipate these objections of God’s choice of Jacob over Esau and then Paul biblically refutes them. In essence, what the apostle is discussing here is how can we reconcile God’s sovereignty with the reality of human choice? He will finish the section by pointing in v30-33 to the real answer to the problem of unsaved Jews and Gentiles – faith in Jesus Christ alone.

(1) THE FIRST OBJECTION ANSWERED (v14-18)

In v13 Paul cited from the OT a clear statement of God’s sovereign unconditional election of Jacob over Esau while the two infants were in the womb, “*As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.*” Now Paul is cognizant that this will elicit an objection that God is unjust and arbitrary, “*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?*” This is based on two premises:

- (a) It is unjust and arbitrary to elect/choose Jacob by mercy and not Esau.
- (b) It is unjust and arbitrary to hate/reject Esau before he was even born.

Before we look at how Paul responds to this objection, one point must be noted. The very fact that Paul deals with such an objection here proves that the interpretation we adopted in v6-13 of God’s unconditional sovereign election is correct.

Critics of this view say that the word “*foreknew*” in Romans 8 only means that God in eternity past just knew in advance that a group of people would choose Him in time and responding to that He then predestinated them. But if this were true then this objection in v14 would be redundant. For then salvation would be the reward of our faith and man has effectively co-shared in salvation. Of course if man saved himself by his exercise of faith this increases the pride of man and robs God of His rightful glory. Probably, that is why so many oppose the teaching of the sovereign unconditional election of God. Man cannot stop himself seeking some glory in his salvation.

So how does Paul respond to the charge that God is unjust in electing Jacob and not Esau or Isaac and not Ishmael? In essence he is answering the question how is it that God can be righteous in justifying one person and condemning another? As he had done previously, Paul begins his refutation of such as slur on God’s character and work with an emphatic denunciation, “*God forbid.*” The simple idea is “Perish the thought. By no

means! Impossible!”

Then Paul takes up the Scriptures (not philosophy or logic) and uses the sword of the Spirit in v15-18 to prove that God is not unjust in exercising His sovereign right to elect some and not others to salvation. In v15-16 he will show that God has the sovereign right as God to show mercy to whom He wishes to do so. Then in v17-18 he will look at the other side of the issue and show that God has the sovereign right to reject or refuse to extend mercy to others.

In v15 Paul begins by selecting a quotation from Exodus 33 when Moses besought God to manifest His glory upon the whole nation. The Lord points out to Moses that He is sovereign in deciding this by the repeated use of “*I will*” as Paul cites, “*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.*” The terms mercy and compassion are somewhat similar yet there is a difference. Mercy refers more the actions and compassion the emotions that produces the actions of mercy.

The connection and the argument should be obvious in the context of salvation:

(a) None of us should be seeking justice from God, as we all deserve hell! God has the justifiable right to condemn all mankind eternally. Only mercy can save us.

(b) God owes no one mercy. So if He decides not to extend mercy He does no man an injustice. God is absolutely free to extend mercy or not to do so. We have no right to claim grace and mercy from Him so if He refuses to extend it to Esau or Ishmael God is just. Therefore, sovereign unconditional election in no way impugns the righteousness of God. No one will be in hell who does not truly deserve to be there.

In v17 Paul then selects another OT quotation to buttress his argument that God has the sovereign right to reject sinners. This illustration will deal more the objection that God is unjust to reject Esau. It is interesting that Paul uses Pharaoh. Both Moses and Pharaoh were both murderers and both witnessed the power of God. Yet, God will elect one for salvation and the other passed over.

We get an insight here into why God raised Pharaoh up to his position. He did so we are told to reveal the glory and power of God throughout the earth, “*for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew My power in thee, and that My name might be declared throughout all the earth.*”

HARDENING OF PHARAOH’S HEART

In Exodus 7-14 we read of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart at least 15 times. Sometimes the Scripture records that Pharaoh hardened his heart and others we are told that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. So which is right? The answer is **both** things were happening in the life of this evil man.

The Bible makes it clear that God does not create sin or tempt a man into sin, “*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed*” (James 1:13-14).

So the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is God simply allowing Pharaoh to aggravate his sinful nature and passions. Pharaoh is not a mere puppet in the hand of God, but is responsible for his own rebellion. God does not harden the hearts of innocent people. So how does God harden the heart of Pharaoh?

(a) Paul teaches us that God hardens rebellious sinners by giving them over to their

sin by simply withdrawing from them His restraining influences, “*Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves*” (Romans 1:24).

- (b) In Romans 7 Paul made clear that when the law of God confronts the unregenerate man it aggravates the sinful nature of man.
- (c) When God’s mercy and power are displayed to others it provokes greater rebellion and hatred by sinners. We see this exemplified in the attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees to the ministry of Christ.
- (d) When God gives a person over to the forces of evil. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul speaks of giving a person over to the devil and in 1 Kings 22 we read of God handing Ahab over to a lying spirit.

Now some people will say that for God to harden Pharaoh’s heart is unfair, as He should intervene to prevent Pharaoh sinning more. But why should God be obliged to do so? Pharaoh is fulfilling God’s purpose of His greater glory in his increasingly hardened state. Besides, if God cut Pharaoh off sooner or restrained him then this would reduce the ultimate punishment for Pharaoh’s sin. That would be grace to Pharaoh – grace that he does not deserve! So, God does no injustice by allowing Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened in his sin. Pharaoh obtained justice. Moses got mercy but God has not acted unjustly to Pharaoh.

(2) THE SECOND OBJECTION ANSWERED (v19-29)

The second objection arises from a wrong deduction from the truths Paul has just stated in his reply to the first objection in v14-18, “*Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?*”

The basic objection is this: If God chooses from His sovereign unconditional will to elect some and not others, then how can men like Esau and Pharaoh be held responsible for their unbelief and sin? So if God hardens us then why does He blame us for being hard? The questioner wrongly deduces that God’s sovereign unconditional election means man must be a mere puppet in God’s arbitrary hands and therefore no longer responsible for his sin. After all God has already decided not to show mercy to them and work through their evil for His glory before they were even created so we don’t really have a choice.

So how will Paul answer this objection and attack on God’s character? He never fully answers this question but makes three points:

(a) The Creature has no right to question the Creator (v20-21)

Paul begins by reminding any objector of his place, “*Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?*” Paul makes clear – God is God and we are not!

Man has no right to question God for he is just dust and ashes. He is not the equal of God. The imperfect can never find fault in the eternally perfect! For man is weak, insignificant, sinful, limited in knowledge and ability. He dare not presume to cast judgment on the Holy, Omnipotent, Omniscient true God. If anything today, man is even more prouder just because he has a tiny fraction of understanding of nuclear

physics or the biochemistry of a cell. Deffingbaugh notes the perverse irony,

“God is acknowledged to be the One judging men, and yet the questioner has taken the seat of the judge by asking this question. And the questioner has seated God in the seat of the defendant, the accused. Now God is expected to explain His actions to men. God is being judged and condemned by men for condemning men! How amazing is Satan’s work of turning things upside down.”

Paul cites from Isaiah 64 and Jeremiah 18 to show that God like the potter can do what He wishes with the vessels He molds, “*Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?*” This molding to honour and dishonour is not talking about the creation of man, as God created man in the “image of God” and not in dishonour. Rather the context here must be seen of God viewing the clay of fallen humanity and molding it according to His sovereign purpose. We don’t tell God what we will be anymore than the clay can dictate to the potter what it should be. The analogy is picturing God’s relationship to man in salvation. The Bible does not teach that God deliberately set out to create men to send them to hell. God did not make Pharaoh a sinner - he was one in Adam. As one writer observed,

“God determines whether a man will be a Moses or a Pharaoh. Neither Moses, nor Pharaoh, nor anyone else, could choose his parents, his genetic structure, or his time and place of birth. We have to believe that these matters are in the hands of God. However, this does not excuse us from responsibility. Pharaoh had great opportunities to learn about the true God and trust Him, and yet he chose to rebel.”

(b) God has purposes that we do not understand (v22-28)

It should be noted that Paul does not backpedal or dilute what he has said of the truth of unconditional sovereign election. He reminds the objector that we do not have the infinite knowledge and wisdom of God. Everything that God does reveals some aspect of His character. God has purposes in what He does that we do not understand. Paul does not give an exhaustive list but gives some examples of this.

In v22, Paul reveals that God is longsuffering with the increasing rebelliousness of the ungodly to reveal His power and wrath against sin, “*What if God, willing to shew His wrath, and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.*” By contrast, in extending mercy to His elect people, God reveals the riches of His glory, “*And that He might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory.*” God gets glory not only from the salvation of sinners but His righteous judgment against the sins of the wicked.

What should be carefully noted is that the word “*fitted*” in v22 is in the passive voice. Thus God is not the subject here doing the fitting, but the rebellious sinner as he stores up the wrath against himself for his sin (Rom. 2:5). God is not responsible for man’s depraved predicament. Lloyd Jones observes, “Election alone accounts for the saved, but non-election does not account for the lost.” It is true that man cannot save himself but that does not mean man is not responsible for his own sin. All men sinned in Adam and sin willfully in thought, word, and deed. Yet, from Genesis 3 man is always seeking to blame God for his sin. As MacArthur points out,

“There is the very clear sense in this use of the passive voice to relieve God of the responsibility and to put it fully on the shoulders of those who refuse to heed

His Word and believe in His Son. They are prepared by their own rejection for a place prepared by God, not originally for them but “for the devil and his angels” (Mt 25:41).”

Whereas by contrast in v23 the word “*prepared*” is an active verb as God is actively doing this preparing because we could not, “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them*” (Eph. 2:10). The wicked prepare themselves for judgment, but God prepares believers for glory. This vindicates God’s righteous judgment in allowing sinners to receive the just recompense of their sin. As Wiersbe points out, “In Moses and Israel God revealed the riches of His mercy; in Pharaoh and Egypt He revealed His power and wrath. Since neither deserved any mercy, God cannot be charged with injustice.”

Of course the question that hangs on many lips is: If all deserve to go to hell, then on what basis does God choose those He will sovereignly elect? The answer is very simple – the Bible does not tell us and we have no right to ask. A sovereign God does it by His will alone “*it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy*” and for His glory “*that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy.*” That is all we can say and then put our hands over our lips lest we speak unadvisedly. The fact that we don’t fully understand this doesn’t change the truth of unconditional election. The inscrutable mind of God is a great mystery.

In v25 to v28, the apostle then selects a series of OT prophecies from the books of Hosea and Isaiah to show that the calling of the Gentiles and the preserving of a remnant within Israel has always been part of God’s plan.

(c) If God was not sovereign in election everyone is lost (v29)

Paul has one final point to make, which perfectly summarises the whole argument. He does so by citing from Isaiah, “*And as Esaias said before, Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we had been as Sodom, and been made like unto Gomorrah.*” In Isaiah 1 the prophet catalogued the depth of the depravity of the sins of Judah. Then in v9 he points out that they were behaving like Sodom and Gomorrah and were facing the same complete destruction as the judgment unleashed by God on those two wicked cities.

Paul cites this historical quotation to prove that unless God had not sovereignly acted in grace to elect a remnant in Israel, then every Jew would have been annihilated. The fact that you are a Jew does not save you but it is all of sovereign grace. A classic illustration of this is seen at the end of the book of Acts,

And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. (Acts 28:23-24)

Here is a situation where the same type of people from the same background heard the same message from the same preacher from the same Bible, yet some believed and others rejected. What made those believe and the others reject? Intellect or ability cannot account for it. So what makes the unwilling willing? It is the workings of sovereign grace in the heart of one and not in the other. Or to put it another way, “He doesn’t make you go against your will, He just makes you willing to go.” The group who believed were those like Lydia, “*whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul*” (Acts 16:14).

This truth is equally true for us today. Often we witness the same truth in our society. Lloyd Jones observes,

How often has this happened in a family! Two brothers, with the same father and mother, the same home, the same upbringing, who went to the same school, the same chapel, and the same Sunday-school, and heard the same gospel – everything the same. One believes and the other does not.

God's sovereignty not only necessitates election, but if God had not unconditionally elected by sovereign grace every believer then there is not a person here who would ever be saved. All of us would be like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Our wills are not free in the absolute sense but are slaves to our sinful natures. Lewis Johnson makes a good observation,

“Paul says our salvation is not of him that willeth. That's plain isn't it? It is not of him that willeth. In fact, the Lord Jesus said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him.” No man can come. Forget about Lewis Johnson for a moment and think that you are in the synagogue and Jesus is speaking and he says, “No man can come to me, except the Father who has sent me draw him.” Would you like to stand up in a meeting like that and say, “But wait a minute, we have free will. We can of ourselves come.” You see what a contradiction with the word of God that is? Not only is it a contradiction of the word of God, but it's a contradiction of grace, because then we can say our salvation is of ourselves as well as of God.”

The only thing that explains why you are today a justified believer is not the workings of fate or because you were smarter than the next person, but because of the inexplicable sovereign grace of God. There is no other reason – pure and simple. We should be amazed that any of us are believers. Every Christian is a miracle of grace. For this, we shall be eternally grateful. Lloyd Jones puts it well,

“The only alternative is to take the credit to yourself for salvation. The only alternative is to say – ‘It was my belief that did it. I am saved and the other man is not, because I exercised faith.’ That means that you have saved yourself. There is something in you that is not in the other person...If you believe that, then what is it that makes you believe and the other man not believe? ‘Well,’ you say, ‘I understood the gospel and the other man did not.’ But why was that? What was it about you that made you or enabled you to understand and not he? There must be something better in you than there is in him – a better brain perhaps, or you are more spiritually minded. But, how do you know you are like that and why are you different? ‘Well,’ you say, ‘I don't know, I just am.’ Exactly! You do not determine it, do you? You were born like that.

So in the end it comes back to this: you either believe in accident and chance, or else you believe in the election of God. You have either got to say, ‘Well, it is my natural condition, I was just born like this, and I find myself believing while the other man does not.’ Or else you can say that it is, ‘the purpose of God according to election.’ And that is what the Bible teaches: ‘as man as were ordained to eternal life believed.’”

(3) THE ONLY ANSWER FOR JEW AND GENTILE (v30-33)

After sweeping away every objection to the doctrine of divine sovereignty, Paul then turns to the real problem of every fallen Jew. As does so, Paul will show that the truth of the doctrine of God's sovereign unconditional election does not nullify human responsibility. The apostle believed and taught both and so must we. Nowhere does the Bible invite us to choose between these two strands of truth.

Divine sovereignty is God's business whereas the other is our business. God will perfectly take care of His business and we need to mind our own business! If you find yourself in hell, you cannot blame God, but your own sinfulness. Henry Ward Beecher was right in noting the human perspective, "The elect are the whosoever will's. The non-elect are the whosoever won'ts."

In v33 the apostle citing from Isaiah 8:14-15 and Isaiah 28:16 tells us that God has placed in Zion a great stone or rock – Jesus Christ. The root problem of man is not that the way is not clear or that God has not provided a perfect means of salvation. No, the root problem is the pride of man whose self-righteousness stumbles over the idea that he needs a Saviour. Man is full of the pride of morality, pride of achievement, and pride of intellect. Like the Jews mentioned modern man, "*hath not attained to the law of righteousness.*"