The Doctrine of Election

Isn't It Unfair for God to Choose Some and Not Others?

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Romans 9:14-18[1]



If you have your Bibles with you I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans 9 as we continue through this great chapter. We are going to be looking at verses 14 to 18 today, but I'd ask you to look back at verses 1 through 13 and allow your eyes to scan it because I am going to remind you of a couple of things Paul has already said. It will help you understand the subject that he will introduce in verse 14 today.

In verses 1 through 5, the Apostle made it clear that he had a heart of compassion for his own people. He was an Israelite of Israelites and even though his people in his own time had, by and large, turned their back on Jesus the Messiah and were rejecting the gospel that Paul was preaching, he makes it clear that he loves them. He loves them from the bottom of his heart. He loves them with a quite extraordinary word.

That, at the very least, should let you know that what he is going to talk about from verse 6 to the end of this chapter is not some sort of an arid, dry, abstract, speculative, theological diatribe. Paul is invested in witness, he is invested in evangelism, and he is invested in gospel witness to the Jewish people, and their rejection of Jesus as Messiah is not simply the occasion of some sort of a philosophical thought fest on his part. This is something that strikes at the core of his heart. I hope that that will help what he has to say in this chapter be more digestible to you because he has some very hard things to say.

But realize that Paul does not see them as someone who is detached from this particular crisis, detached from this particular trauma and trial. He is very much invested in the

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plight of his own people and yet he can speak very clearly and forcefully of God's sovereignty in this.

Then in verses 6 through 13 he introduces the problem. The problem is this: "Paul, if God has made these promises to Israel, if He made them hundreds and hundreds of years ago to Abraham, why is it, then, if the gospel is the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, that Israel has by and large rejected God's promises?" In verses 6 through 13 the Apostle Paul answers that question by appealing to God's election. He says, "No, God has not forsaken His promises because you need to understand that those promises are not simply made generically to all those who are physically descended from Abraham; they are made specifically and covenantally to those whom God has chosen." "Jacob have I loved Esau have I hated" is the culminating point of Paul's argument in chapter 9 verses 6 through 13.

In other words, Paul is saying, "If you want to understand how it is that God's promises have not failed, you have to understand that God chooses." God chooses Jacob; he passes by Esau the dispensation of His mercy. That is His choice.

Now as you might suspect this immediately raises an objection. And that objection is what Paul is going to respond to in Romans 9 verses 14 through 18. So let's hear God's holy word:

> What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

> *Our heavenly Father, Paul's words are hard not because they are unclear, they are painfully clear, but because they are difficult for our rebellious hearts to accept. We are curious. We want to call You to account. We want to inquire. We want to interrogate the Almighty. But You have a greater design in Your word so humble our hearts to teach us that we might see Your grace. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.*

Fallen human beings have a hard time swallowing the sovereignty of God. We have a hard time anywhere we bump into the sovereignty of God in Scripture or experience

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swallowing it. I well remember as a fifteen-year-old boy at my grandmother's house, reading through the first chapter of Ephesians with grandmother and granddad and my aunt and the family for our morning devotions. And at the end of those devotions, knowing that my grandmother did not share my same love for Calvinistic doctrine, knowing that I better not open my mouth about the word *predestination* that had popped up a couple of times in that passage. And after about thirty-five seconds of awkward silence my grandmother could resist it no longer and she said to me, "Now son," referring to herself and to grandfather, "we're Southern Baptist and we don't believe in predestination."

Now with all the tact of a fifteen-year-old, I restrained myself from engaging in a theological dialog and I said, very diplomatically, "Grandmother, you believe in predestination. It's just that you think it means something different than what we as Presbyterians believe that it means." She immediately responded, "Son you don't understand. We're Southern Baptist and we don't believe in predestination." And I quickly responded again, "But Grandmother, you believe in predestination, the word is there in Ephesians 1, it's just you think that it means something like God 'foresees that we're going to chose Him' and I believe that it means 'God ordains that we are going to choose Him.'" And she immediately responded, "Son you don't understand. We're Southern Baptist and we don't believe in predestination."

I realized about fifteen years later that my Grandmother had two control beliefs: The Bible is true and predestination is not and therefore there is no place in the Bible that teaches predestination. It doesn't matter if the word is used or not. Now I want to quickly say, I love Southern Baptists. My elders are actually a little bit suspicious of me because I hang out with Southern Baptists so much.

Let me also say that Southern Baptists used to believe exactly what Presbyterians believe and in fact many, many Southern Baptists believe right now what Presbyterians believe about God's sovereignty and salvation. It's in all the Baptist confessions. Look at the Philadelphia Confession, the New Hampshire Baptist Confession, the *Abstract of Principles* of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Southern Baptists and Presbyterians used to agree on this entirely. There has just been this collective amnesia among Baptists for the last hundred years.

The point is, we sometimes have a hard time swallowing God's sovereignty. It makes us uncomfortable. A friend of mine shared with me a quote that he had found in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* just a few weeks ago. A Presbyterian minister stood up in the pulpit for his Sunday morning message. He's not a minister of the Presbyterian Church in America. He told his 475+ member congregation this right after his 49-year-old wife had

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died in an automobile accident. He said this; "This was not a preordained part of God's plan. It was an accident and luckily no one has yet said to me it was God's will or there would have been two tragedies. It was an accident pure and simple." We find it sometimes very hard in Scripture and experience to accept God's sovereignty and Paul knew that because the minute he had asserted God's sovereignty in verses 11 through 13 in this chapter, he gets the objection, "That's not fair." And that's precisely the objection that Paul is going to respond to in verses 14 though 18.

He does it in three ways. In verse 14 he states the objection in the form of a question, and he gives a short answer to it. In verses 15 and 16 he explains that salvation is not about fairness; it's about mercy. Then in verses 17 through 18 he says, anytime you're talking about God's judgment; you're dealing with a matter of God's choice and God's purpose. So, let's look at what Paul says in this great passage today. If we find God's sovereignty in providence hard to swallow, if we find God's sovereignty in salvation hard to swallow, if we're tempted to say 'that's just not fair' we need to recognize that Paul is responding in these verses precisely to those kinds of concerns.

And may I suggest that as we approach this passage, if that is your struggle today, that you determine to separate two questions in your mind. Instead of simultaneously asking, "What does the Bible teach" and at the same time "how can that be so?" Simply ask the question, "What does the Bible teach?" Leave the other question for later. That's what Paul does in this passage. He simply addresses "What does the Bible teach" and then he explains how that can be so.

I. The Bible Teaching of God's Sovereignty Strikes Many as Unfair

First in verse 14 notice the objection, "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God is there? May it never be." In this passage Paul asserts that God and God's choice, God's electing love, God's election of some is not unjust. The question you see is, "Isn't it unjust for God to choose some but not others?" Paul has just said what? "Jacob have I love and Esau have I hated" and immediately someone says, "That's not fair." And the apostle says, "No, no, no God's electing love is just. It is not unjust."

The Bible teaching of God's sovereignty may strike us as unfair, but the Apostle Paul immediately meets that objection with the assertion that God's election is not unjust. People often react as if God's absolute authority in salvation is arbitrary, it's capricious. The Apostle Paul says, "Oh no it's the farthest thing from arbitrary, it's the farthest thing from caprice, it's the farthest thing from injustice." And I want to say that the very fact that Paul gets this objection to his teaching is proof that he is teaching election.

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If Paul in verses 11 through 13 had said, "Look the reason Jacob was saved and Esau was not was because Jacob made a decision and Esau didn't." Nobody would have said, "But wait a minute, that's not fair." But the fact that Paul did not say that, but that rather the difference between them was to be found solely in the sovereign choosing mercy of God provokes the reaction "That's not fair." And so, the very objection that Paul's teaching gets proves that he is indeed teaching the doctrine of election.

Listen to what Phil Ryken says, "As soon as we say that God chooses, we immediately encounter objection. It is the objection that Paul himself raises in verse 14, 'Hey that's not fair.' Even if election is biblical, as Paul has just proven, some people still wonder if it is fair. Now before we look at Paul's answer we should consider the objection itself. What do we learn from the very fact that the question of fairness is raised at this point in the argument? I think that we learn that Paul really is teaching election.

One of the things that convinces me that Romans 9 actually does teach the Reformed doctrine of election is that this passage deals with exactly the kinds of objections that people usually have against that doctrine. As soon as we say that salvation comes from God's sovereign mercy, the first thing people say is 'That's not fair.' And that's exactly what Paul expects people to say, which, you see, confirms that he really is teaching the doctrine of election." Let me say that if this is your objection, that election isn't fair you may be sure that what you are objecting to is what the Bible actually teaches. That's the first thing we learn in this passage.

II. Our Salvation is Wholly Dependent Upon God's Sovereign Mercy

The second thing you'll see in verses 15 and 16; God's salvation is rooted in mercy. Isn't it interesting that once Paul raises this question, 'Is God unjust in His election?' He answers it this way. Look at what he says in verses 15 and 16: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Notice that in verses 15 and 16 He says nothing about justice. Now that's strange. The question is about God's justice. Is God being unjust? And in Paul's answer he says nothing about justice. He only speaks about mercy. So let me ask you a question.

Has Paul's answer answered the question? The question was about justice. His answer is all about mercy. Is his answer an adequate answer to the question? The answer is "Yes." Why? Because Paul, by referring strictly to mercy in response to the question about God's justice, is teaching you this; <u>salvation is not about fair; it's about mercy</u>. Salvation is not about fairness; it's about mercy. Salvation is not about getting what you deserve, salvation is about mercy. If you want to get what you deserve, well that's simple. The answer is hell.

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Salvation isn't about justice. If you want justice in salvation you have to look at Isaiah 53. There is the justice of salvation. That's what we should have deserved. That's what we deserve. That's what we should have gotten, but because of what Jesus did, recorded there for us in Isaiah 53 we receive glory at the hand of God's mercy. Paul is telling you, "No, no, no, if you are worried about God's justice and salvation you're thinking about the wrong category. The category you need to be thinking about is mercy." Salvation is all of grace. If we demand strict justice, then punishment, judgment, God's ban, God's curse, God's hell is what we get.

Furthermore, if we discount God's sovereign mercy, then we forfeit assurance. If we think that our salvation is based on something that we have done we'll never ever get it or we'll never ever be assured of it. Notice what Paul says in verse 16, "So it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." So many people say, "Oh no, salvation is about my free will." Notice what Paul says, "So it does not depend on man who wills."

You see, you're not arguing that this is Calvin here. That's Paul that you're arguing with. And others say, "Oh no, salvation is about doing good deeds and being a good person and earning your salvation so it does depend on man who runs." It's not the things that man does; it's not the perseverance that we do on our own that garners salvation. No, it depends on God who has mercy.

You know it's the same thing that John says in **John 1:11-13**, do you remember that? Jesus comes to His own and his own receive Him not. And then what does John say in verse 12? "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born." How was it that they believed on His name? They were born not of blood. They didn't get it by their natural descent. Nor of the will of the flesh. They didn't get it by their free will. Nor of the will of man. They didn't get it from their dad; but of God. Salvation is of God. Salvation is all of grace. God's salvation is rooted in mercy. Our salvation is holy dependant on God's sovereign mercy.

Now I know immediately that someone is going to say, "Well then, what are we supposed to do then? How are we supposed to respond to this? Does this mean we don't have to do anything?" Paul answers that next week. Come back and I'll give you his answer. But for now all he wants you to see is this: If you're thinking about God's fairness in salvation with regard to some being saved and others not, you're thinking about the wrong category. The category is mercy. See, the only thing you can complain about is that God gives to some something that they don't deserve; heaven. While He gives to others

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precisely what they deserve. That's the only thing that you can say. You can say, "Lord you are entirely too generous." Yes, you can say that, but you cannot say that He is unjust.

III. God's Discrimination in His Dealings with Men is Both Just and Sovereign

Finally, he speaks of that very hard truth of God's passing some by. You see this is one of the objections that people have to election. If you say that God chooses some, then that inherently means that He must pass over others. Yes, you are right and that is precisely what the Bible teaches. It's hard to swallow, but it's crystal clear. Look at verses 17 and 18. Here Paul makes it clear that God's judgment is purposeful and that His passing by of some is fair and discretionary. He quotes this passage from Exodus that occurs around the sixth plague when God speaks to Pharaoh and says, "For this very purpose I raised you up to demonstrate My power in you and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth. So then, He has mercy on whom He desires and He hardens whom He desires."

Now I want you to notice that once again, what's the problem that Paul's responding to? "God's being unfair in choosing some and passing by others." First Paul says, "No you need to think about the category of mercy, not justice." Notice that once again he's responding to an objection about God's justice and he says nothing about justice in this passage. He only speaks about God's purposes.

So first he wants to talk with you about mercy, now he talks about God's purposes. What is he saying to you? He's saying this: God has a reason for what He does and it's not unjust. And just because He hasn't let you in on the secret doesn't mean that it's unjust and it doesn't mean that it can be called into question. Notice how he stresses this in four ways. He says, "For this very purpose I raised you up." God had a reason what He did with Pharaoh. He had a purpose. I raised you up to demonstrate My power in you. So God's passing over Pharaoh was purposeful and it was demonstrative. It was to demonstrate God's power.

Furthermore He goes on to say "that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." In other words, God raised up Pharaoh and passed Him by because it was part of His purpose in order to demonstrate His power, and in order to declare Himself to the nations. So it even had an evangelistic purpose to it.

And finally, notice He has mercy on whom He desires, He hardens whom He desires. It's volitional. It all boils down to the choice of God. Now Paul just lays it down there. He doesn't apologize for it. That's just the way it is and you can think of one hundred

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objections in your mind to it right now because it's uncomfortable, but you know, you can't argue that that's not what Paul is saying because Paul is crystal clear. He says, in answer to the question, "Is God's election just, with regard to those who are saved?" he says, "You have to look at the category of mercy." With regard to those who reject God, you have to look to the category of God's purpose.

Now of course it's also true that God is just in his judgment of Pharaoh because Pharaoh was a sinner. He was a sinner who had rebelled against God and had mocked His name, but isn't it interesting that Paul doesn't even bring that up in this passage because he wants our focus to be on the sovereign choice of God. Why in the world would Paul give us such a teaching here?

There are a lot of answers to that question, but I want to say this morning that believing the plain teaching of the Bible, even when it is hard to accept is a very important component of Christian discipleship. Because if we will reject this teaching, so clear in its word, because it is uncomfortable to us then there are other teachings that we will be willing to object to and reject because they are uncomfortable to us. But the mark of a disciple is that he believes the word of his master and so because we believe the words of our Master, we believe even when do not fully understand what God teaches us in His word.

And of course, the great point of this passage is that God's electing purposes exalt His mercy. Toplady put it this way, "A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing." When we see God's choice as sovereign in salvation we realize that our salvation is all of grace. It is not based on our inherent worthiness, it is not based upon our deeds, it is not based upon our backgrounds, it is not even ultimately based upon our choice or our faith. Those are instruments of God's grace. It is based upon God's grace alone and therefore we may be assured that His grace will persevere because perseverance isn't based on us, it's based on Him. And therefore we may be assured of His love because of His acceptance of us is not based on something in us, it's based wholly on Him. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank you for the truth of Your word. Grant that we might believe it for the good of our souls and for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

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