The Doctrine of Election

Romans 9-11 Isn't About Nations and Your Free Will is a Myth

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Heralded by Calvinists as irrefutable proof of God's sovereignty in salvation, Romans 9-11 is arguably the most theologically complex section in all of scripture. One can (and should) spend a lifetime considering the implications of these verses and what they mean for God's plan of redemption. Having examined many arguments about why this text doesn't mean God is wholly sovereign in salvation, I have never found any of them to be even slightly compelling. This is especially true for the common "Romans 9-11 is about nations, not people" argument.

This position[1] is wholly unconvincing for two main reasons. The first is that scripture teaches us that Christ was numbered with the transgressors (Isaiah 53:13), and He knows His sheep by name (John 10:14). Salvation, in Christ, is always a very personal thing. While nations are certainly used in this text, they are still comprised of individual souls purchased by the blood Christ. Paul even begins his argument in Roman 9 by contrasting two people – not nations. As it is written, "*God loved Jacob and hated Esau*" (Romans 9:13).

The second reason why I am not persuaded by nation-centric explanations is found in verses 14-15 and rooted in the doctrine of God. It is here, I think, we find a "lynchpin" argument for the human versus divine will debate within salvation. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that an assertion of a libertarian human free will is an absolute myth. Salvation is monergistic. It is a work begun and completed by God. Though some hold on to their "choice" as if their soul depends on it, the truth is as Jonathan Edwards **once said**:[2] "You contribute nothing to your salvation except the sin that made it necessary."

Before going further, I think it's important to make a point not directly addressed in our Romans 9-11 text. That is that the human will, outside of Christ, is enslaved to sin. Paul carefully establishes this foundation in Romans 1-5 as set up for our text. The natural man is spiritually dead and fully opposed to God's law. Indeed, without God-given faith men

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[1] BE A BEREAN! This link is to the Wesleyan Arminian website: https://wesleyanarminian.wordpress.com/2014/09/19/arminian-principles-for-interpreting-romans-9/

[2] https://www.monergism.com/jonathan-edwards-selected-shorter-writings-ebook

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are God-haters. It is summed up in Romans 3:10: "*There is none righteous no not one.*" This doctrine is often called Total Depravity, meaning that, our entire being is totally/completely plagued by sin. I will not say anything else on this for now. For further reading, I recommend this **collection of resources**.[3]

Returning to our primary text, Romans 9:14-15 reads, "*What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."*

We must not forget that Paul was an Old Testament scholar and master of the law. So, when we see him quoting scripture, we should pay close attention to the quote's original context. The use of the word "For" also tells us this quote is being used to explain a statement. In this case, Paul is quoting The Old Testament to defend against anyone who might think it unfair that God elected to love Jacob and hate Esau.

The quoted text comes from Exodus 33:19 – perhaps one of the most well-known chapters in Exodus. In this chapter, we read of Moses meeting with God on Mount Sinai. After the LORD confirms with Moses that he and his people have found favor in God's sight (v. 17), Moses places before God a bold request. He asks of the Lord, "*Please show me your glory*." I am unaware of another place in scripture where such a request is made. It is worthy of some further consideration.

Fragile, finite, and sin-soaked Moses is asking the eternal God of all time, space, and dimension to reveal His own glory. Good theology reminds us that God's glory is the end of all things; it's the purpose by which all things are. Everything God is and does is for His own glorification. Though difficult to fully define, God's glory is perhaps best understood as an outward manifestation of God's holiness. In other words, His glory is the summation of His infinite perfection, greatness, and worth. You may recall, His glory is so great it would cause the death of any sinful being who dared to look upon Him. Therefore, as we will see, God prevents Moses from seeing Him.

Pastor John Piper **has this say**[4] to about God's holiness and glory: "His holiness is what he is as God that nobody else is. It is his quality of perfection that can't be improved upon, that can't be imitated, that is incomparable, that determines all that he is and is

[3] https://www.monergism.com/topics/total-depravity-man. Many excellent resources here!
[4] Desiring God, Ask Pastor John. https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-gods-glory--2

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determined by nothing from outside him. It signifies his infinite worth, his intrinsic, infinite worth, his intrinsic, infinite value."[5]

The grandeur and significance of Moses' request cannot be overstated. He is asking God to show the indescribable – Himself. In heaven, we will spend eternity beholding and continuously learning more about God's glory. This is truly an incredible moment in scripture.

If you have had some exposure to Christianity (or Judaism) you might recall that this is about when God hides Moses in the cleft of the rock. Such an event has been the content of countless wonderful sermons. But, often overlooked, it is what God says right before that moment that is of significance for our current interests.

Verses 18-19 read: "Moses said, "*Please show me your glory." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."*

In jaw-dropping fashion, God describes His own glory to Moses in that He can show mercy and grace to whomever His wishes. This is how He communicates to Moses what it means to be God. Contrast that to humans, God alone has complete freedom and autonomy to do as He wishes. He is bound by nothing. No one tells Him what to do or can question His decisions. A complete, autonomous free will is an attribute unique to God. He does as He pleases, and everything He does is just. Therefore, Paul cites this Exodus text in Romans 9 to justify election.

Considering this information, here is Paul's full response:

> *"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 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 depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 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." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.*
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> *You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump done vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring*

[5] Note to reader: Piper's quote was transcribed directly from a sermon and may not reflect proper grammar.

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to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction…" (Romans 9:14-22).

I never cease to be amazed at how unapologetic scripture is for hard truths. Paul is clearly not ashamed of the gospel (1:16) or concerned about his critics. God is sovereign. God is God. He is aided by no one. We add nothing to Him. Yet, in love, He sent His Son to die on a cross for sinners, like me.

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