

God's Sovereign Choice – Romans 9:6-24

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Perhaps no other passage in Scripture gets right to the core of the question as to whether or not man's own will, desire, or decision is involved in his salvation, as does the Apostle Paul's discussion of God's sovereign choice of a people for Himself in Romans 9. The reader is encouraged to first review and study prayerfully the entire passage of Romans 9:6-24 before proceeding with the explanations that follow, so that a complete consideration can be given to the context of this passage and the individual verses themselves. We should consider very carefully, verse by verse, what Paul is teaching and exactly what he intended to communicate.

Paul began Romans 9 by lamenting that many of the Jews rejected the message that Jesus Christ was indeed the Messiah, and that salvation and the forgiveness of sins comes through Him alone. Paul said that the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises were all given to the Israelites. He then continued to explain in the following verses that it does not mean that God's word had failed because so many of the people descended from Israel (or Jacob) were rejecting His salvation through His Son Jesus Christ.

As he continued his teaching in verse 6, Paul explained that not all of the people of Israel by birth will be included in spiritual Israel, but only those who are the “children of the promise”. In this passage Paul used the example of God’s sovereign choice of a particular people in the Old Testament in order to demonstrate God’s sovereign choice in His calling of a particular people to faith in Christ, not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles.

Here Paul began his discussion of God’s sovereign choice of His people, even from among the descendants of Israel, by saying that just because they were directly descended from Jacob in the natural way did not mean that they would be included with spiritual Israel. This is what Paul meant when he said: “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants” (Romans 9:6b-7a).

Paul then continued the discussion by quoting Genesis 21:12, saying that it would be through Isaac that Abraham’s true offspring, the children of God, would come. Isaac himself was the child of promise born to Abraham and Sarah. God promised Abraham that he would have a son through Sarah, even though Abraham himself was about a hundred years old and Sarah was known to be barren. Nevertheless, in God’s time, Sarah did conceive even in her advanced age, though she was unable to do so as a young woman, and Abraham did have the son of God’s promise, who was Isaac. God gave life in the dead womb of Sarah, fulfilling His promise of a son to Abraham. And as Paul also taught, God “gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.” (Romans 4:17).

As he continued his teaching in Romans 9:10, Paul carried the discussion of God’s sovereign choice of a people for Himself a generation further by considering the twin sons of Isaac and his wife Rebekah, who were Jacob and Esau. Let us look carefully at the following verses where Paul wrote: “for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’” (Romans 9:11-13).

Paul taught in these verses that God makes His choice or election of His people, just as He had decided to do concerning Jacob and Esau, before they are even born, and before they have done anything at all, either good or bad. The teaching that Paul intended to communicate here becomes very clear in the next verse, because we see that he anticipated objections to what he had just written. Beginning in verse fourteen we read: “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.’” (Romans 9:14-15).

If Paul were teaching that each and every person ever born could be saved if they so desired by deciding for themselves that they would receive Christ and not reject Him, then there would be no reason for him to anticipate any objection at all. After all, if everyone had a chance at salvation, and if their salvation ultimately depended upon their own choice and decision whether to accept Christ or reject Him, then in terms of human ideas of what is fair and what is just, nothing could be fairer and more just than allowing each man to decide for himself.

However, Paul was not teaching that man’s salvation rests ultimately with his own personal decision either to accept Christ or reject Him. On the contrary, what Paul taught in these verses was that the choice of man’s salvation rests with God alone, and that He has mercy and compassion in this respect upon whomever He chooses. Paul understood that in the minds of most men, this concept of God’s salvation will be considered unfair, unjust, and unreasonable, and this is exactly why he anticipated that many would object to what he was teaching.

In verse 14, Paul responded to these anticipated objections and protests by stating emphatically that God is not unjust. All of those whom God leaves in their sins receive justice, in that they pay the just penalty for their sins in an eternity separated from God. Those of us whom God has chosen to bring to faith in Christ, however, receive something far better than justice. We receive God’s mercy, and not the justice due us for our sins, in that the blood of Christ will cleanse us from all of our sins. From Paul’s teaching here we see that some receive mercy from God, while all of the others receive justice, but no one receives injustice from God.

Paul then continued, teaching clearly that a person’s own will or desire or effort has nothing at all to do with their salvation, but their salvation is solely and completely dependent upon God’s decision as to whether He will show mercy to them. This teaching is revealed in verse 16 where Paul wrote: “So then it ***does not depend on the man who wills*** or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” (Romans 9:16, emphasis added).

As we have noted previously, many who say that man ultimately decides for himself whether or not he will receive Christ will freely admit that no man can come to Christ unless the Father draws him, just as Jesus taught in John 6:44. They will then insist that at some point in each and every individual’s life, the Father

does draw or enable them to come to Christ. And they will then go on to say that at this point the individual must decide for himself whether he will accept or reject Christ as his Lord and Savior. Those who hold this view are saying that indeed salvation *does* depend on man's will, and the decision is his, but the Apostle Paul is saying with clarity and with no ambiguity in Romans 9:16 that salvation *does not* depend on man's will, or his effort, but the decision is God's.

There is clearly a contradiction here between the teaching of those who say that man's own will is the determining factor in his salvation, and the teaching of the Apostle Paul who said that man's salvation does not depend upon his own will, or his effort, but it depends upon God, who decides to whom He will show mercy. If we as believers hold the view that each man's own will and decision to either accept Christ or reject Him is the determining factor in his salvation, then we must ask ourselves how this teaching of Paul's in Romans 9, and especially in verse 16, can possibly be consistent with our own opinion.

The Holy Bible is the inspired word of God, and it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). If there is ever a contradiction between what the Bible teaches and our present understanding of things, then we should be willing to let the Scriptures themselves be the guide for what we embrace as the truth.

After Paul's statement in Romans 9:16 that man's salvation does not depend upon his own desire, or his own effort, he continued his teaching of election and God's sovereign choice of a people. Paul emphasized God's decision to save those individuals to whom He has decided to show mercy, and he also taught that God chooses not to show mercy to others, even hardening them against His will. Paul wrote: "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." (Romans 9:17-18).

Here Paul used the example of Pharaoh, whom God hardened against His will and against the request of Moses to let the people of Israel go from their bondage in Egypt. As Paul quoted from Exodus 9:16, God hardened Pharaoh against Himself in order that He might show His power and that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth by the miracles He wrought through His servant Moses when He brought His people out of Egyptian bondage by His own might and power.

God hardened Pharaoh against Himself and accomplished His own purpose through it. One might ask: Why did God harden Pharaoh; why did He not just show mercy to Pharaoh and make him willing to obey Him? God does not reveal His “reasons” why He chooses to harden some, and He chooses to show mercy to others. However, it is revealed to us that God’s mercy shown to those whom He calls to faith in His Son has nothing whatsoever to do with their own works, and therefore no man can boast that he obtained God’s favor by his own actions (Ephesians 2:9-8, 1 Corinthians 4:7). The fact remains, as Paul taught in Romans 9:18, that God has mercy upon whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens those whom He wants to harden.

Continuing with verse 19 we read: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? ***For who resists His will?***’ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” (Romans 9:19-21, emphasis added).

In these verses we see that Paul again expected that some would object to what he was teaching and would question how God could find fault and condemn someone whom He has chosen to harden against His will. The hard truth that Paul is teaching here, is that regarding salvation, ***no one is able to resist God’s will*** (Romans 9:19).

Those to whom God shows mercy are called to faith in Christ, and none refuse that call. Whereas those to whom God does not show mercy are not called by Him; they are left in their sins. These are not able to come to faith in Christ by their own innate desire or decision (John 1:13, Romans 8:7, Romans 9:16), because no man has the ability to come to Christ unless God the Father draws him (John 6:44). Paul answered these anticipated objections by saying that it is not for man to question his Maker regarding His sovereign decisions about those whom He has created and how He decides to use them, whether “for honorable use” or “for common use” (Romans 9:21).

Paul concluded his teaching in Romans 9 regarding God’s sovereign choice of a people for Himself when he put forward these questions: “What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared

beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” (Romans 9:22-24).

We see here in these final verses of Romans 9:6-24, that there are those who are “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”. And in contrast there are those who are “vessels of mercy, ***which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called***” (emphasis added), and these He called from among the Jews and from among the Gentiles also, Gentiles being categorically all of those who are not Jews. Those who are vessels of His wrath, prepared for destruction, are those to whom God did not want to show mercy. These He hardened, as Paul said in verse 18.