

Romans 9-11: Election in Salvation History, I

Let us turn to Romans 9 to study the third great passage in the New Testament pertaining to the doctrine of election. These three passages, Ephesians 1, Romans 8, and Romans 9 speak of the subject over the span of a number of verses. In order to understand what is going on in Romans 9 we need to understand that one purpose of Paul's epistle to the Romans is to foster unity among Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman church. We should teach and preach from Romans with the goal of establishing unity. I cannot take time to do a full exposition of Romans 14 and 15. Let me just say that in those chapters we learn that the congregation in Rome is divided along Jewish and Gentile lines. There are those who are compelled to eat only that which is clean and others who feel free to eat that which is clean and unclean. The ones who have a stricter diet are called weaker brothers and sisters. The stronger brothers and sisters can eat whatever they want. The weaker feel a duty to keep certain days. The stronger are free concerning the days. It is not hard to understand the identity of the weaker and stronger.

This is usually thought to be about a decade after the Jerusalem council, which was around 49-50 AD. But there is a practical problem. By the way the words "unclean" and "clean" are used tells us it is Jews and Gentiles who are involved. The early church at Pentecost included pilgrims from Rome. We know that from Acts 1-2. There is no doubt they went back to the capital of the empire, because the Christian church in Rome, as all Christian churches were in the very beginning, was a Jewish Christian church. In time, God added Gentiles to their number. We do not know what their attitude was toward that, but they did accept them. At the time of the writing of Romans, the Jews appear to be a minority. The Jewish Christians, in their minds, were a persecuted minority within their own church because they had scruples about eating kosher and keeping Sabbaths, Saturdays, new moons, Jewish feasts, and other days.

In any case, the Gentiles felt free. They would eat their hot dog any day of the week. Unfortunately they were not very respectful of their Jewish Christian brothers. They did not have to celebrate Passover if they did not want to, but they should not have flaunted their liberty in front of the Jewish Christians. There were divisions in the congregation. Romans 14 and 15 speak to this. For example, Romans 15:7 says, "Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you." I love that verse for a number of reasons. Sometimes I find Christians of a particular doctrinal persuasion or church affiliation who ask the question, "What do I have in common with a Christian of another persuasion?" You have in common the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Gospel, and the Word of God. In other words, you have all the important things in common. Certainly on the level of personal fellowship, the main thing to be considered should be if the other person knows Christ. We should accept him or her with open arms into our own personal homes and fellowship. In order to be officers in a church there are more doctrinal requirements. I understand that. I believe in doctrine, but I also believe in the doctrine of Romans 15:7—"Accept one another just as Christ accepted you." He accepted us freely. In the same way the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome are to accept one another.

Paul gives several principles. They are told in Romans 14:22, which says, "Whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God." There are things that are a matter of personal Christian liberty and conscience. Another principle is that they are not to put a stumbling block in their brother's way. It is fine for the Gentiles to eat all the hot dogs they want, but they ought not to do it in front of the Jews' houses on Saturday. It is just not respectful. Another principle is that each of them will answer to God. In the first few verses of Romans 14 Paul asks, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" Whose servant is he speaking of? It is God's servant. Then he says, "To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand."

Paul has confidence in the Lord as he says in Romans 14:4. But he is not altogether pleased with the Romans. One of the purposes of the letter, for there is more than one, is that Paul wants to elicit prayers from them. He wants to elicit financial support so he can take the Gospel to Spain. He also wants to foster unity in the church at Rome. That is why there is the recurrence of the refrain that begins in the theme statement of Romans. In Romans 1:16-17, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek," occurs numerous times. Paul uses it often throughout the letter to try to bring unity. He shows them they are saved by the same Gospel. He shows them that they were saved from the same condition of sin and being under God's wrath. He shows them they have the same Savior. He shows them they are saved by the same faith and on it goes. It is a powerful letter.

A number of the epistles in the New Testament, Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans, share this theme. One of the major purposes of those four letters is to promote unity. Many of our churches today suffer from disunity. If we did a better job of teaching the epistles with the purposes in mind that God had at first, we would do that important task of preventive medicine. The seeds of disunity for your marriage or for your church are in your heart and mind right now. All it takes is the wrong environment for those things to fester and grow and make trouble. We need the ongoing preaching of the Word of God. We need to be present at the ordinances or sacraments of the church. We need to pray and use all the means of grace God has given to keep the unity in the church.

There is a problem that Paul seeks to solve in Romans 9-11. The Jewish Christians are discouraged. Romans 9:6 addresses the problem. It is not that God's Word had failed. How could the Jewish Christians think God's Word had failed? He made promises to Israel in the Old Testament. From the day of Pentecost and for a number of years thereafter it looked like God was going to fulfill those things by bringing the old Israel as a whole into the new Israel, the church. But as time went on, it was not the case. The rabbis opposed Christianity. Paul no longer had the liberty in the synagogue to testify to Christ. The battle lines were drawn. Fewer Jewish converts came into the church and God opened the doors wide to the Gentiles. After a while, the Jews were outnumbered by the Gentiles.

I do not blame the Jews for their question. It was an honest question. After the powerful words of Romans 8:28-39, God promised to save them and keep them to the end. It sounds wonderful. They want to believe it. They do believe it, but they have a problem being Jewish Christians. God said things like that in the Old Testament. He was going to make an everlasting covenant with His people and now it looks to them like God has withdrawn His promises to Israel. It looks like He has not been faithful to His Old Testament covenant people. Paul answers these questions with a no and a yes. Has God withdrawn His promises? No, He has not. Is He faithful? Yes, He certainly is.

Here is the big view of Romans 9 and 10. Paul places side by side two very different but complementary perspectives concerning salvation. In chapter 9 he emphasizes the sovereignty of God. The absolute sovereignty of God in salvation is explained in very strong language. In chapter 10, he emphasizes genuine human responsibility. This is what we call philosophical compatibilism. The two ideas fit together in Paul's mind.

In Romans 9 Paul argues that God has not withdrawn His promises to Israel. And God is not unfaithful. God has saved the first century Jews whom He willed to save. He saved both the Jews and Gentiles whom He willed to save. There is the emphasis on the sovereignty of God. Neither has God's Word, His promise, to Israel failed. God has sovereignly fulfilled His promise according to His own plan. Has God's Word to Israel failed? Paul says no, Israel got exactly what it deserved for its disobedience to God. He answers first of all in terms of God's control and then in terms of genuine human responsibility.

We must do the same. These things do not cancel each other out. That is remarkable. That is my thesis, though I need to prove it. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are compatible.

The fact that God is sovereign and He has saved whom He wants to save does not rule out human responsibility in Paul's mind. We are not robots. It does matter what we do according to Paul, because Paul says plainly that Israel stumbled. Romans 9:30 says, "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.'" The stumbling stone is Christ, which Paul refers to in a quote from the Old Testament, Isaiah 8:28.

Romans 10 begins with Paul's expression of his heart's desire for Israel's salvation. Romans 10:2-4 says, "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." Plainly, he blames Israel for its unbelief. Should we therefore define sovereignty as God forcing human responses and verifying them ahead of time? It is not so according to Romans 9. There is not a word of that in Romans 9. If sovereignty is in play then are we not responsible? No, that is wrong. I am saying that these answers are side by side.

I will not focus on this question, but for the sake of completeness, Paul's response to the question deep in these Jewish Christian hearts is that the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. God does not take them back, so there will yet be a future for Israel. I cannot prove from this chapter that national Israel is part of God's plan. Some Bible teachers are dogmatic on that point. I am not. It does look to me like an end times conversion of ethnic Israel, whether there is a nation of Israel or not. For more on this I point you to Anthony Hoekema in *The Bible and the Future*. He has a nice discussion of this including different views. He is a very fair writer.

Understand where we are going. One purpose of Romans is to establish unity in a fractured church. There are factions here. Jewish and Gentile believers are not getting along. The Jews feel depressed. The Gentiles are boastful and proud. They have forgotten, to use the language of Romans 9-11, that they are the wild olive branches grafted onto the stalk of Israel. They are not the root. They should not be proud. They should thank God for Israel and God's grace, which has made them a part of spiritual Israel. They should be more respectful of their brothers. There is a big problem that is reflected in Romans 9:6 where Paul says, "It is not as though God's Word had failed." Some were questioning that. It seemed to the Jewish believers as if God's Word had failed. His Word had not failed. He is faithful. He has saved those whom He wants to save. Yet there is genuine human responsibility.

Are these equal and ultimate principles? No, because God is God. He is in charge of every person's fate. But my point is His sovereignty does not cancel out human responsibility, according to Paul. He still blames Israel for their unbelief. When doing that he does not qualify sovereignty as Arminian believers have done. He simply does not do it. And Romans 11 rounds it out by saying, "God will yet turn Israel to Himself."

It is common for some to have tension in their minds about the fact that God holds us responsible for our unbelief and the fact that faith is a gift from God. I sense two things in such a question. One is regarding unbelievers and the other believers. They are two different categories. Believers have had their will set free by God's grace. That is why they embrace Christ as offered in the Gospel in the first place. Thus we have a real measure of the freedom of will. It is not as we will in the new earth, when we will not be able

to sin but will be able to please God. We are not able to do so as unsaved people. So we need to make a distinction between believers and unbelievers because they are different in what they can do.

Responsibility and ability seem to be two different things biblically. God holds us responsible to do things that we cannot even do. If my understanding of the Bible is right, we are responsible to believe, but we are unable to believe. We are responsible for our sins, although we are in need of God's grace if we would be saved. Faith is a gift from God. In terms of God's sovereignty, faith is a gift that He gives and He is under no obligation to give it to anybody. In terms of human responsibility, God does hold us accountable. In the judgment passages people are condemned for their thoughts, words, and deeds. The question is somewhat beyond our scope for this discussion, but the passage as a whole may help. In the end, it connects election and calling.

Romans 9:1-5 says God has greatly favored Israel. Paul says, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." That would debunk some people's view of the Christian life. Some people I know would say that he is not very spiritual. Yet somehow the peace of Christ and his joy is compatible with having times like this. Maybe he is exaggerating about "unceasing anguish." Certainly Paul was not always on a spiritual high. Then he says, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed." That sounds like Moses who said, "Blot my name out of Your book, O Lord God, for the sake of these people." That is the heart of a pastor who loves his people. It does not mean that Paul could really accomplish what he wishes, to get himself condemned, but he could wish he could give himself on behalf of Israel. He would if he could. Then He continues, "For the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen." Paul is rehearsing the great blessings from God to Israel. And the final verse teaches the deity of Christ.

He turns to the notion that we began with: God's Word had not failed. He gives the Jews and Gentiles in Rome a redemptive history lesson. God's Word, he says, has not failed as redemptive history shows. The history of God's dealing with Israel shows that God's Word has not failed. In each case, Paul points to God sovereignly fulfilling His will. I differ from some reformed theologians in that I do not see election taught here over and over again. I see a principle of God sovereignly doing His will. Paul says this to the Jews in Rome who are despairing because the number of their brothers and sisters who are coming to Christ and into the church seems to be shrinking: "Have you forgotten your Old Testament history?" From the beginning God has sovereignly called Israel to Himself. It is no surprise that in this day and time He does the same thing. He says in verses 6-7, "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'" In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children. It is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

What the Lord is saying is that He sovereignly gave Abraham and Sarah a child. He took a couple that was as good as dead for childbearing and He gave them a miracle son. Abraham and Sarah schemed on their own with Hagar to produce Ishmael. The Lord essentially said, "No, that is not how it is going to be. I am going to magnify my name. I am going to show you that I am the one who is going to make this nation out of you, Abraham. And I have waited for you and Sarah to get too old to have children in order to show you that. And no, you are not going to scheme and use the ancient Near Eastern custom of the handmaid producing a son and becoming an heir. That is not how it is going to work because that is your doing. Sarah, I am going to return to you and you are going to have a son."

What did Sarah do? She laughed at God. Some Arminian theologians (I told you that I will try to work my way through and show the ways they have used to try to explain it to fit their theology) have said that it is children of the promise in verse 8. That means the ones who believe the Gospel. I will not deny that sometimes with Paul, promise is a synonym for the Gospel—but not here. The promise referred to here is a very specific one. It is not the mere offspring of Abraham who are the spiritual seed of Abraham. It is the children of the promise. It is the children who come through Isaac. It is the children who come God's way. It is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring, for this was how the promise was stated. Romans 9:9 leaves no doubt about the fact that when verse 8 mentions the promise it is not talking about human belief in the Gospel. It says, "For this was how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.'" The promise is the divine fiat. It is a divine word that comes to pass in spite of Sarah and Abraham's scheming and in spite of Sarah's unbelief. God gave them Isaac because He said He was going to give them Isaac and that is what He did.

Then we get to the next generation. I am not saying he is talking about election and reprobation yet. I am not saying that Isaac is elect and Ishmael is reprobate. I am not saying that at all. I am saying that Paul is giving them a redemptive history lesson. In the first generation God magnified His sovereignty. So the Jewish Christians in Rome should not be surprised that God is doing the same thing He has always done. He is doing what He has sovereignly ordained to come to pass. The next generation shows the same thing in the sons of Abraham through Isaac, who are Jacob and Esau (Romans 9:10-13). Paul is intentionally choosing to start first with Abraham and then move on to the next generation in order to emphasize God's sovereignty. These verses do not talk about human responsibility. They do not deny it, because the next chapter talks about it. But you cannot interpret these verses in terms of people making choices and God ratifying their choices. It does not work. Paul writes, "Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'" That is an unusual thing. That is a reversal of the birth order principle. The older, Esau, will serve the younger, Jacob. Then follows the statement, "Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved but Esau I hated.'" I would not even push this as an example of election and reprobation. It is the Jewish language of love and hate not to refer to God's salvation or rejection in a spiritual sense, but God's special relation with the one in comparison with the other. God did bless Esau in some ways. But in terms of being in the promised line, Esau was rejected. We are not going to defend all the methods of Rebecca and Jacob, the supplanter. But those are not even spoken of here because it is not appropriate. What is appropriate is to trace, through the history of Israel, the sovereign doings of God.

Calvin taught me that my understanding is correct because there are potential protests that Paul deals with in the text. Consider Romans 9:14, which says, "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" Then Paul says in Romans 9:19, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" Paul could have said that God was not sovereignly doing these things to human beings. He could have said not to worry because God has limited his sovereignty, given free will to his creatures, and He is ratifying their decisions ahead of time so that it is really they who are choosing Him. But he does not say anything like that. The fact that these questions are even asked leads me to believe that I have understood it correctly. Furthermore, the answer he gives in verse 20 is to basically say, "Do not talk back to God, you worm," or something like that. He puts us in our place. If it sounds like we are robots, we are not, but we learn that from chapter 10. There is no doctrine of human free will in Romans 9:1-29.

Paul's argument continues with Israel and Egypt. If we study the dealings of God with His people, we had a hint of rejection in the person of Esau. Now we have more than a hint in the person of Pharaoh.

The reason the question about God's justice is raised is that Paul has been accenting the sovereignty of God. It is the same response some of you might have had when you heard this notion of God's sovereign election. I will admit that hyper-Calvinism at times has distorted matters and not put Romans 10 alongside of Romans 9. And some wonder that if this is true, then why do we witness the Gospel? I agree that witnessing the Gospel is very important. A theology that would lead us to not witness the Gospel is a wrong theology because the Bible so clearly commands us to witness the Gospel.

Is God unjust? Not at all, "for He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" What is emphasized in verse 15 is not the creature's abilities or doings. It is the Creator's prerogatives that are emphasized. Notice it is only positive in this verse. He speaks of mercy and compassion. Verse 16 is a remarkable statement: "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Let me give you a literal rendering of the verse. "So then, it is not of the one who wills, nor of the one who runs, but of the mercy-showing God." Specifically, human willing and running are said not to be the cause of salvation. Ultimately, we do believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But the only reason we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ is that God chose us before the creation of the world. We did not know about that. We had nothing to do with that. We would never know if He did not tell us in His Word. But He does tell us in His Word. Furthermore, He tells us not only positively that the cause is in God having mercy and showing compassion on whom He wants to, but also that negatively it is not of the man who wills or of the man who runs. That figure of speech of "running" can be found in Paul. Paul says to the Galatians, "I want you to go on in the Lord and to believe and not turn back to works and circumcision so that I will have not labored in vain nor run in vain." It is easy to figure out the image. It is a picture of showing human effort. You expend a lot of energy when you run. So whether God has mercy or shows compassion does not depend on man's desire or effort, but it depends on God's mercy. There is an explicit cancellation of human willing or doing.

Some have said that God foresees our choosing of Him. This verse seems to deny the very fact. Romans 9:17 says, "The Scripture says to Pharaoh..." The Scriptures could say a number of things about Pharaoh. He could appear in chapter 10; if he did it would say something like Pharaoh hardened his heart and God gave him what he deserved. That would be biblical truth because he is a guilty sinner. That is not what chapter 9 says, however, because it is not what Paul is talking about. He is not talking about Pharaoh getting what he deserved as a sinner, which is true. Rather Paul says, "The Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" Pharaoh appears as an instrument in the hands of almighty God. Pharaoh was the supreme person, actually the supreme being, in Egypt. Pharaohs thought they were gods. And the man's pride got the better of him repeatedly when Moses had the audacity to come into his presence and make all these demands about Jehovah and going out to worship Him. Furthermore, you have to see the plagues as a contest between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt. All the plagues were attacks against what the Egyptians worshipped, showing that Jehovah was the true God and so forth. Verse 17 emphasizes the utter sovereignty of God in using Pharaoh for God's purposes. Is it an absolute denial of human responsibility? Of course it is not. It is an absolute affirmation of divine sovereignty, because that is what Romans 9 is about.

Verse 18 is the clincher. Remember this whole section is a response to a question about God's justice. He has mercy and He shows compassion to whomever He wants. It does not depend upon human will or human expenditure of energy, but salvation depends on God's mercy alone. Therefore verse 18 says, "God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy and He hardens whom He wants to harden." There is a progression in the argument. We have both the positive and the negative side. Some days I may not

like it. But it is not our right to pick and choose what we want to find in holy Scripture. It is our job to conform our thoughts, our lives, our wills, and our emotions to God's truth.

My thesis is that Romans 9:6-18 is about one thing. It is a salvation history lesson. Are you so short of memory, Jewish Christians in Rome? Let us go back to the Old Testament and do a little study. God's Word has not failed when the numbers dwindle. God's Word has not failed when human beings think it should work one way and God works it out another way. That is exactly what happened with Abraham and Sarah. They had their plans. God had His plan. And even though Sarah laughed in His face, God had the last laugh. He called the child Isaac, meaning "he laughs," which reminded her of her unbelief and of God's sense of humor in fulfilling His Word. God has sovereignly accomplished His will. He did the same in the next generation. God set the birth order on its head in order to magnify His sovereign will. God had mercy on whomever He wanted to have mercy. And He hardened whom He wanted to harden—in this case, Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Redemptive history shows God's Word has not failed. God has sovereignly accomplished His will. Here is where He has been going the whole time in saving and condemning first century Jews and Gentiles.

In saving and condemning first century Jews and Gentiles, God expresses his sovereign rule. I agree that this is one sided. I thank God that Romans 9:30 through chapter 10 follows this one or we might have a skewed view. The question in verse 19, the word of protest, convinces me that we have properly understood things.