

Romans 9-11: Election in Salvation History, II

This question is asked in Romans 9:19: “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’” You may ask if this does not totally undercut human freedom. Why does He still blame us if He has mercy on one and hardens another? We had nothing to do with it. Who resists His will? He is the creator. We are just creatures. Paul’s answer is merely to put the question or the protester in his place. “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” That which is formed does not have much say in the matter. So far he has argued without specifically mentioning God in verses 20 and 21. He is using metaphor to speak of the human creature and the Creator, God. When he speaks of the potter and the clay we are the vessels of clay and God is the potter.

In Romans 9:22 his purpose becomes plain. I am going to show you the ways that Arminian theologians have dealt with this passage to see if you agree with what they have done. Paul says, “What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory...” One Arminian objection is that these are questions. Paul is asking questions. He is not teaching truth. Another one is that it is hypothetical. It asks, “What if God had that power as the maker of the pottery to do what He wants with it?” In verses 22 and 23 Paul asks “what if.” It is hypothetical. It is not saying He actually does that. It only means that hypothetically He has the prerogative to do what He wants with His vessels. But really He has respected the rights of His highest creature, man, and given him the freedom of will. And He based His plans, ultimately, on what He foresees the creature will do.

What do I think about these arguments? Are these verses merely rhetorical questions? They certainly are rhetorical questions. That is, they are questions in form but they are not really asking for information. They are a way of teaching. I know that from verse 24. And that is the same answer to whether they are hypothetical. What about the fact that these are questions and are not really making statements? Are they just a hypothesis and not saying God actually does this with His creatures? Is it just asking, “what if”? In other words, He would have the rights to do it if He willed to do it, but He did not. Another argument is that throughout Romans 9-11 there is a distinction between Jews and Gentiles and that is what he is talking of here. It is a corporate image with the vessels that is not specific. It is talking about the Jews who have been put out and the Gentiles who are the noble vessels who have now been brought in. That is what he is talking about. It is not referring to individual vessels of salvation being Jews and individual vessels who are lost being Jews. That is not it. As a matter of fact, however, that is what it means and we know it from verse 24 because it plainly takes the matter out of the realm of hypothesis into actual fact when it says, “whom also he called even us, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles.”

Those objections do not really hold water. Paul identifies certain first century human beings as the vessels of mercy when he says, “even us.” His thought in verse 23 is what if God put up with unbelief in order to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for glory, even us. It is not hypothetical. It is actual. He claims himself to be a vessel of mercy. The preposition used in the Greek is not a special Calvinist Grammar construction. It is just standard Greek grammar. The grammar indicates that Paul is talking about a whole group out of which there are some Jews and some Gentiles who are called. So Paul identifies first century Jews and Gentiles as called.

Calling is the evidence of the prior election. Being chosen is communicated in the notion of the potter doing what he wants with his pottery. The fact that verse 24 identifies actual first century human beings

as vessels of mercy indicates that this is not a hypothetical statement on Paul's part. It indicates he is not talking about the Gentiles as the noble vessels and the Jews as the rejected ones, because there are two different groups and each one has a subset. "Even us" is the term he uses to refer to the vessels of mercy prepared in advance for glory. "Even us" refers to those whom God has called—whom God has effectively summoned to Himself—not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles. Verse 24 thus teaches that some first century Jews are the vessels of mercy whom God has called to Himself. And some first century Gentiles are the vessels of mercy whom God has called to Himself. Thus Paul answers the doubts about whether God's Word had failed with this redemptive history lesson. His Word has not failed. God has sovereignly accomplished His will in saving and condemning first century Jews and Gentiles.

Let me work more carefully now with Romans 9:22-23. Paul begins by saying, "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known..." He has ordained to do that. He has borne with great patience. God has not ushered in the end of the world and the resultant great judgment yet. By His waiting, by His not bringing the end, He has shown great patience. Did you ever endure with unsaved people, perhaps in a job? I know some of you have. It is a terrible thing. Can you imagine the holy God who is infinitely holy putting up with His creatures who rebel against Him every day of their lives? Even God's people, even we are a cause of embarrassment to the Lord, let alone the wicked.

"What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath prepared for destruction." God puts up with the reprobate every day. Why does He do it? Paul answers that in verse 23 by saying, "What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory." In other words, if God had said, "Enough is enough. The measure of sin has reached—has overflowed the cup—and here comes judgment." If he had done that 25 years ago, some of you I speak to would be lost because we came to the Lord in between that time. God's postponing the final judgment and enduring the wicked has given more and more time for Him to bring His people to Himself.

Notice the imagery Paul uses. God is the potter. There are two types of vessels that come off the potter's wheel. They are the objects of wrath and the objects of mercy. The objects of wrath are said to be prepared for destruction. That is reprobation. It is not the only thing the Bible says about the wicked. It is not the major thing the Bible says about the wicked. The primary thing God says about the wicked is, "The soul that sins, it shall die." People get what they deserve for their sins. But in at least a few places it indicates that God stands behind the fate of every human being. Those who know Him only know Him because of His sovereign grace. Those who do not know Him, although they get what is coming to them for their sins, have not escaped from the sovereignty of God. Therefore they could be called vessels of God's wrath, prepared for destruction. It is not the whole picture, but it is one part of it.

Likewise, other first century human beings are vessels of God's mercy—those whom He prepared in advance for glory. Is that merely theory? No, because it is including "even us." Is it merely the group ideal of Gentile and Jew? No, it is a subset of each of those bigger spheres. It is "even us whom he also called not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles." I am compelled by these verses to teach a doctrine of double predestination. By now you know I do it carefully. It does not nullify evangelism for me. It does not cancel out human responsibility. But the Bible teaches God stands behind the fate of every human being. I believe it on the basis of Romans 9:6-24. Even if I had nothing but those verses, I would teach exactly as I have. And let me give a little more qualification. My understanding of Romans 9:22-24 in the context of the whole Bible is that God contemplates the human race as sinners. Before the creation He decreed and planned to permit the Fall. Thus He contemplates the human race as sinners, or what Augustine called, "the damned mass." That is, humans are all from that same lump of clay. We are

all lost in His sight. We all deserve to perish, but the potter, for reasons known to Himself, out of that same lump of clay makes a multitude of vessels of mercy and He prepared them in advance for glory. Praise be to His name. Praise be to the glory of His grace, His sovereign grace.

On the other hand, while contemplating the human race as sinners, He also planned to pass by others and to allow them to receive the just recompense for their sins. That is my understanding of His having vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. So God stands behind both the elect and the reprobate, both the saved and the lost. He stands behind both. I cannot say His sovereignty extends only to the one sphere and not to the other and these people are out from under God's control—captains of their own fate. God stands behind both, but as I said before, He stands behind both in different ways. He is the cause of the grace that saves these people. He is proactive. He is not the cause of the sin that damns these people because He has viewed the whole mass, elect and reprobate alike, as lost in His sight. All He has to do to condemn these people is to choose to allow them to pay the penalty for their sins. In contemplating the Fall as something that was going to happen, He could have justly condemned the whole human race to hell and nobody could have made a protest before Him. But while He has done that for many, for multitudes He has decreed another fate. He, the potter, has fashioned them as vessels of mercy whom He has destined for glory.

Even though God is only proactive with one group, it is still double predestination. It is double in that God is sovereign behind both fates, though not in the same way. He is not the cause of the evil as He is the cause of the good. He is not the cause of sin. He did not choose for people to sin. He planned to permit the Fall. I know that is awkward. Are you going to say He caused the Fall? Will you make Him chargeable with sin? I cannot do that. Are you then going to cut the Fall totally loose from God's control? Will you say God relinquished His control completely and His creatures ran amuck? I cannot say that. He had to plan to allow the Fall. I do not love that expression, but it is the best I can do.

Arminians do not believe that God is not in control. They do believe God is in control. The way that the majority of Arminian pastors handle this matter is by avoiding it. I am not being nasty. I will be fair and say that Calvinists avoid the apostasy passages. I am not trying to be unkind. In the book, *Grace Unlimited*, which I recommended to you as the best Arminian book, the fine scholar I. Howard Marshall wrote the essay on predestination in the New Testament and he makes some good points from the Arminian side. He appeals to mystery. In that essay the first thing he says is "I believe in predestination." He has to say that because in his tradition some have said they do not even believe in it. Some have not been blunt about it, but they have neglected it. For this passage in Romans 9 the Arminians have said we have a Jewish and Gentile motif running through Romans 9-11. They are right. They say that therefore the two types of vessels are to be understood as Gentiles, the noble vessels, and Jews, vessels of destruction. That interpretation does not fit because verse 24 assigns vessels of mercy from both groups. They also say the verses are merely questions. They are not teaching devices. I can show you chapter after chapter of Romans where Paul uses questions to teach. In Romans 8:31 he says, "What then shall we say in response to this?" And he says, "If God is for us who can be against us?" It is not asking for an answer. It is saying God is for us. No one can successfully oppose us. And when he says, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies." He is not asking for answers. He is emphasizing the fact that God is the supreme moral being of the universe. He has declared us righteous and no one will condemn us. When he says, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" He is not asking for questions. He is exploring, showing that no one and no thing will separate us from the love of God in Christ. Likewise, in Romans 9:22-23, the questions are indeed in interrogative form but they are rhetorical questions. The form is merely interrogative. The questions are not asking for answers. Instead, they are an emphatic way of teaching that the potter image from the

preceding couple of verses is now expanded specifically to talk about the fates of first century human beings.

When Romans 9:18 says that God has mercy on whomever He wants to have mercy and He hardens whomever He wants to harden, some say it seems that both of these are active. Yet I say God is behind the fates of the two respective groups asymmetrically. Verse 18 is not talking about election. It is talking about the manifestation of God's plans in history with His having mercy on the Israelites in Egypt and with His hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Egypt. God actively works out His plans in history. But I am talking about the work of the potter before history, before the history of the world.

Some have taken these verses to mean that not only does God stand behind both, but God stands behind both in a stronger and equally proactive sense on both sides than I have. Traditionally, supralapsarian Calvinists have done that. I respect them. As a matter of fact, the best book I know on Romans 9 is John Piper's book, *The Justification of God*. He argues that way from this passage. In my view, if we only had this passage, it would look that way. I am not saying my reading of Romans 9:22-23 is the only reading. But I am fitting it in with the bigger picture of Scripture. So the preparation for destruction is slightly different than the preparation in advance for glory. The former is in the passive voice referring to objects of His wrath, "which were prepared." It means we are prepared by God. I do not deny that. It does not mean we are prepared by ourselves or by the devil. But it says, "which were prepared." Regarding the next group it says, "which He has prepared beforehand for glory." That is a stronger reference to God. It is possibly indicating a distinction with the passive form. I am suggesting the passive form fits with passing over. The active form is "that he prepared in advance for glory." Could you get supralapsarian Calvinism out of this? Could you get the distinction of human beings in the mind and plan of God before He contemplates them as sinners? Yes, you could if you only had Romans 9. Yet on the basis of the full witness of Scripture, I follow Louis Berkhof, B.B. Warfield, Anthony Hoekema, and others to see this as speaking of infralapsarianism. That is, I understand the lump of clay in verse 21 to be Augustine's "damned mass." God contemplates the human race as already sinful. Then from that He chooses many for salvation and He just has to pass over the others. Is it the only interpretation possible? No, but I do think it is the best one upon considering all factors.

A common question is whether it is possible for somebody who is elect never to hear the Gospel. I think there is a category here of infants who die and maybe retarded persons. I am not trying to avoid the question but I do not have a good answer on this one. I am afraid to say something the wrong way because then I could see people saying, "Well then bring the missionaries home because the elect are saved anyway." But I stress that in terms of human responsibility God has told the church to get the Gospel out. So I will leave the electing up to Him. And I will leave the dying on the cross and rising from the tomb up to the Son. And I will leave the actual bringing of people to God to the Holy Spirit. And I will get on with our job. We should get on with our job of proclaiming the Gospel to whosoever will hear, but not as if we are saving people. We should proceed as if there is a sovereign Father who has chosen His people. We should proceed as if there is a sovereign Son who has redeemed His people and a sovereign Holy Spirit who is going to draw those people to Christ as offered in the Gospel. So I am going to stay away from any kind of manipulation. For all the people who say, "Stop right there. I have already tried Jesus," I do not think they ever really believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, and known His forgiveness of sins. Somebody has made the Gospel so unpalatable to them that they did not truly understand the true Gospel and the message of God's wrath and how Jesus is a Savior of sinners from hell. But I do not have the answer to every question.

Paul, who is the apostle to the Gentiles, in dealing with this particular problem in the church in Rome, wisely appeals to the Old Testament to prove what he says. In Romans 9:25-26 he appeals to the Old

Testament to show that God has called “even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.” Paul writes, “As he says in Hosea: ‘I will call them “my people” who are not my people; and I will call her “my loved one” who is not my loved one.’” Paul says that this idea is also contained in the Old Testament Scripture. God has predicted it. He is going to bring the unclean dogs of the Gentiles to Himself as part of His people. He wants the Jewish Christians in Rome to accept this. It is part of God’s will. He continues in Romans 9:26 by saying, “And, ‘It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” they will be called “sons of the living God.””’” The sons of the devil have become the sons of the living God, by virtue of the grace of God. As proof of the fact that verses 25 and 26 speak of the Gentiles, look at verse 27 where Paul says, “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel.” Thus verses 25 and 26 are Old Testament appeals that Paul uses to show that even the Gentiles will be brought into God’s family. In other words, Romans 9:25-29 are verifying what he has just said in verses 22-24. Paul is assuring that the current generation of believers is included in those vessels of mercy predestined for glory because He also called us. That is how they know they are chosen. God summoned them to His Son from the Jews and from the Gentiles. Concerning Gentiles being included in the true people of God, that is what Hosea says in two different places. Concerning Israel, Paul reminds them in Romans 9:27 that “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.’”

Paul wants first century Jewish Christians in Rome not to be surprised if God has saved the remnant of Israel. That is what God has always done. There is ethnic Israel, Israel of the flesh, and then there is spiritual Israel, which is Israel of the Holy Spirit, a subset of the bigger group. Romans 9:27-29 says, “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality. It is just as Isaiah said previously: ‘Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.’” Do you know what the message there is? The sense is this: “Listen, Jewish Christians in Rome, get on your knees and thank God that any of you are saved. It is only because of the sovereign grace of God. In the meantime, rejoice that God has grafted wild olive branches into the stalk of Israel.” By the same token, he is reminding the Gentiles to be respectful of their Jewish brothers and sisters.

There are many fair questions regarding this teaching. Some ask how it relates to the teaching in John 3:16 that God gave His Son in order that whosoever believes in Him might have eternal life. John did not say the Son was given in order that the elect might have eternal life. That verse is an appeal, a genuine appeal, to human responsibility. I affirm it wholeheartedly. If it was within the scope of this course, I would go on and talk about Romans 9:30 through chapter 10 verse by verse the way I have done in chapter 9. Notice the apostle Paul, who has just extolled the utter sovereignty of God in hardening some and showing mercy to others, in the next breath blames Jews for not submitting to God’s righteousness in Romans 10:3. He blames them for having a zeal for God that is not based on knowledge. He blames them for not pursuing righteousness by faith, but for trying to get saved by works. Again and again he says it. So I do not need to go to John 3:16 for teaching on human responsibility. We only need to go to Romans 10:9-13, which says, “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

The apostle Paul put these things right after one another. We need to embrace them both. God is in control. And there is genuine human responsibility.

The next question that usually comes up is “Well, then why preach the Gospel?” Romans 10:14-21 answers that by saying,

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, “I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.” And Isaiah boldly says, “I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.” But concerning Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”

How could Paul say in one chapter, “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” and in the next chapter say, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” My only answer is that the Bible teaches compatibilism. It teaches absolute divine sovereignty alongside genuine human responsibility. They are both taught. Are they both ultimate? Of course they are not both ultimate. God is God. God is ultimate. And the ultimate answer to why people are saved or lost is given in chapter 9. It is because of God’s work as the potter in choosing some and passing by others. I do not say it because I made it up. I could be wrong, but I really think it is what the Bible teaches.

On the other hand, you say, “If that is the case, then God does not blame us for our sins justly.” If you say that you need to read Romans 10 again because He does. I cannot fit it together perfectly. Yet neither can I reject it, because it is what God says. His sovereignty does not nullify His condemnation of Israel for its unbelief. It does not nullify the necessity of getting the Gospel out. Is there a more urgent appeal for the Gospel getting out and for missions than we find in Romans 10:14? It is incredible. Neither does that genuine affirmation of human responsibility, and even guilt and culpability, cause the apostle in chapter 9 to blunt his teaching on sovereignty.

I can understand if you wrestle with these things. I hope you will. Wrestle in the Word of God and I will be a satisfied teacher. Remember that our ultimate fellowship does not depend on how much you agree with me or vice versa. It depends on our being partners together of the Lord Jesus Christ. May the Lord bless you as you consider these issues.