

LET GOD BE GOD!
Romans 9:14-24

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Over the years people have come to me and said, “Pastor, I just can’t understand this thing of sovereign election. I have to go back to John 3:16 because at least I can understand it.” I can readily appreciate their confusion. When I first heard about sovereign election I was stunned and frustrated. This teaching was contrary to all that I had conceived God to be. Yet, I know now that there is more to the gospel than John 3:16. I believe in John 3:16 with all my heart, but I believe the gospel is deeper than this. I tell my “freewill” friends, “I believe all that you do and more.”

It is difficult to grasp sovereign election, but it is not beyond our human understanding if we will reason from the Word of God. If we try simply to think through election, we may never see it. We must take the Bible at face value and use all our reasoning powers to grapple with what the Bible says. We must not reject the Bible’s teaching even if it does not say what we think it should say.

The only reason any person believes in sovereign election is because the Bible seems to teach it. Yet, there is no subject which is more contrary to our human nature or which causes so much rebellion as does election. As Charles Spurgeon said,

“There seems to be an inveterate prejudice in the human mind against this doctrine, and although most other doctrines will be received by professing Christians, some with caution, others with pleasure, yet this one seems to be most frequently disregarded and discarded.”

There is a mystery between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (“free will” as some call it). To deny God’s sovereignty is to deny God. To deny human responsibility is to embrace fatalism. These are two parallel truths, irreconcilable to the human mind, but both taught in Scripture.

SUMMARY OF ROMANS 9:6-13

The Jews thought that they had a right to salvation because of their physical relationship to Abraham and because of the many privileges they had been given as Jews, such as the Mosaic Law and the covenants. They felt that being Jewish automatically saved them. They had forgotten that salvation had always been by grace through faith. So, Paul set out to show that not all those who belong to national Israel are spiritual Israel. The promises of the Abrahamic covenant are only for those who are spiritual Israel or the spiritual seed of Abraham. Physical descent is not enough.

We have seen in an earlier lesson that there was no salvation outside the Abrahamic covenant. Sometimes this is referred to in theological circles as the covenant of grace. Only the Jew who had been saved by grace through faith was part of this covenant. If salvation is by grace, then it must be traced back to God as the original cause, for no person deserves salvation.

Paul showed how God chose Isaac and rejected Ishmael because Isaac was God's son of promise. Then he used the illustration of Esau and Jacob, who were twins, to show how God chose Jacob and rejected Esau according to his own sovereign will. God chose one and passed by the other before they had done good or evil in order that "the purpose of election might stand." And then he concluded with the quote, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."

GOD'S ELECTIVE PURPOSES ARE RELATED TO HIS MERCY — Romans 9:14-18

"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?" In the Greek, this question expects a negative answer and could be translated, "Is there unrighteousness with God? Of course not!"

Paul anticipated that we would have questions and problems with sovereign election. The first objection that all men raise when they hear that God chooses some and passes by others is that God is unfair or unrighteous. Men cry out, "That is not fair! Everyone should have an equal chance to be saved." If God is left to make the choice, man immediately concludes that there is injustice. Men forget that no man deserves salvation, for all are sinners!

We know that Paul was teaching sovereign election, or this question would not have been raised. If election were on the basis of merit, foreknowledge (foresight) or faith, this question would not have been asked.

"God forbid." It is unthinkable that God should be unrighteous. He is holy, just and good. God always does what is right:

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right" (Gen. 18:25)?

I the Lord speak righteousness, I declare things that are right" (Isa. 45:19).

God can do nothing wrong, and the fact that election seems wrong to us as humans does not mean that it is wrong for God. Our best sense of justice is corrupted by a sinful mind.

Men actually feel that God thinks like a man, but his thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa. 55:8). How proud men would like to drag God to the bar of human justice, but he will have none of this. He is God and has the right to do as he pleases with his creatures, and whatever he does is right! Until a man sees himself as a creature and God as the Creator, he will never understand God or sovereign election!

“For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Paul quoted Exodus 33:19 to show that Moses was an object of God’s mercy because of election. If salvation could be attained by merit, descent or office, Moses would have qualified — but even Moses was an object of God’s mercy, which flows from God’s sovereign will. God has the right to show mercy on whom he pleases and does not have to consult his creatures before doing so.

“So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.” This is probably the most humbling verse in all of the Bible. It states that salvation rests neither on man’s will nor on man’s human efforts, but on God’s mercy.

The real mystery is not why God chooses some and passes by others, but why God chooses anyone — for no one deserves salvation from God. If we are saved, it is by pure grace and mercy. If God did not show his mercy, no one would ever be saved, for the only thing men deserve from God is hell.

The fact that a man wills to believe or that he tries to please God is simply an indication that God is at work in him. There comes to my mind the story of a man who was giving a testimony at a meeting. He told how God had sought him and finally found him. When he sat down, the leader of the meeting, a man with rather a legal turn of mind, said, “Now, brother, you have told us about God’s part in the way you became a Christian, but you never mentioned anything about your part. When I became a Christian, I had to read the Bible, and I had to seek, and I had to pray, and I had to do all these other things, and you have not mentioned anything about them.” The first man quickly rose to his feet and said, “Yes, you are right. I didn’t mention anything about my part. Well, my part, sir, was running away from God for thirty years, and his part was running after me until he found me.”

“For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.” Paul quoted Exodus 9:16 to show that Pharaoh was an object of God’s wrath because of rejection. God sovereignly raised up Pharaoh for the hardening of Pharaoh.

“Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.” It is impossible to escape Paul’s argument that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Moses says over ten times that Pharaoh hardened his heart, but long before this God had explained that he himself would harden Pharaoh’s heart:

“And the Lord said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go” (Exod. 4:21).

Paul knew the Old Testament Scriptures, but he purposely picked out this Scripture to show that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

Men are not lost because they are hardened by God; they are hardened because they are lost. They are lost because they are sinners, and they are sinners because of rejection. Nevertheless, Pharaoh was hardened so that he could not believe.

Moses is an object of God's election and mercy; Pharaoh is an object of God's rejection and wrath. God is not directly responsible for man's rejection of Christ, but God is directly responsible for choosing some for salvation. He leaves the rejectors to suffer their just desert of rejection. Why God chooses some and not others is an inscrutable mystery. Moses and Pharaoh both belonged to the same guilty lump of humanity, neither deserved salvation, and God would have been just to condemn both, but in his mercy God chose to save Moses.

GOD'S ELECTIVE PURPOSES ARE RELATED TO HIS POWER — Romans 9:19-24

“Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will [decree]?” Paul again anticipated the question we now want to ask if we have followed his argument. Why does God still find fault with Pharaoh if he cannot resist God's will? Why does God hold Pharaoh responsible if Pharaoh is simply doing what God wills him to do? Doesn't this make man a puppet or robot? When we ask these questions it shows that we really do not understand who God is, and that we have too low a concept of our Creator. It also shows that we have correctly understood Paul to have said something contrary to our human understanding of fairness and justice.

“Nay but, O Man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?” Paul is repelled by this objection. He does not even bother to answer. The one who asks this question really doesn't understand who God is. In fact, he does not understand the first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God...” (Gen. 1:1).

Does the creature have a right to tell the Creator what he should do with his own creatures? Man wants to question God's right to be God. God is free to do as he wills; he is sovereign. Sovereignty means he has the right to do as he wills without giving an answer or reason to anybody. If God has to give a reason to his creatures for his actions, he is no longer sovereign. Yet, man wants to be equal with God, or even to make God less than a man!

“Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?” Paul uses an illustration from life and from Scripture (Jer. 18:1-10) — the potter and the clay. His point is that within the limits of man's finiteness, man exercises the same kind of sovereignty that he tries to deny to God. The potter has the right to take one lump of clay, divide it in half, make one beautiful vessel to display in the living room, and with the other half to make a slop jar for the kitchen. The potter does what he wants with the clay, and does not consult the clay before doing so — and he is not unjust for doing so. Are we willing to give God as much freedom as a human potter?

Someone may say, “But this is clay, not human beings!” All right, let’s look at this in the realm of plants and animals. Does not the gardener have the right to tend one bush and pull up another? Does anyone challenge his right? Does not the rancher have the right to send one cow to the slaughter house and to keep another for two or three years? Does he have to consult the cow before doing so? This is sovereignty. A housewife has the right to shoo flies out the door or swat them with a flyswatter. We exercise sovereignty all the time, and we are only creatures — but man in his pride and arrogance refuses to grant this same sovereignty to the only being who has the right to exercise it whenever he chooses. He fails to let God be God!

“What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction.” God is longsuffering towards those vessels which are fitted for destruction. “Fitted” may mean “prepared” or “equipped.”

This may indicate that men fitted themselves for destruction or that Satan fitted them. But it may also mean that God fitted them. Paul does not say directly that God fitted them, but the context would seem to indicate this. The word “fitted” does not seem to indicate foreordination. Paul seems to go out of his way here to avoid the concept of double predestination. The Bible never explicitly states that God has elected people to be damned. Some are fitted by God for destruction in that he allows them to go on in rejection and sin. But the Bible does state that he has elected men to be saved, and this necessitates a passing by of others.

This verse suggests that in order for some men to be saved, there must be some who are lost. I do not understand this — I do not think anyone does — but I leave this with the sovereign choice of God who is willing to put up with all that man throws at him, century after century, in patient endurance, in order that he might bring to fulfillment the desire of his heart in the salvation of some.

The passive participle “fitted” may be taken as a verbal adjective, indicating merely that the vessels of wrath are fit destruction, without indicating how they became so fit. But God actively “prepared” the vessels of mercy for glory. Some have noted that this change suggests that Paul intended to intimate that God’s action or agency in the case of those prepared for glory is very different from his action or agency in the case of those fit for destruction. God does not create men in order to destroy them. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but takes great pleasure in saving sinners. We must stay close to what the Bible teaches and not carry doctrines further than the Word does.

“And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.” This verse teaches that God has chosen vessels, prepared in eternity past to be vehicles of his glory.

“Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?” Those who are called to salvation by God are those who were elected to salvation and who are being prepared for glory.

CONCLUSION

We all agree that sovereign election is difficult to understand. No objective student of Scripture can deny that it is a biblical concept.

A black preacher, noted for both his piety and biblical knowledge, was approached by a lady who had recently been converted. She said, “Pastor, I am confused about this business of election. Can you help me?”

The pastor answered, “Well, Lizah, are you sure you are saved?”

“Yes, Pastor, I am, and glad of it too.”

“Well, did you save yourself, or did the Lord save you?”

“Oh, Pastor, you know it was the Lord.”

“Well, now did the Lord do it all by himself, or did you help him?”

“Oh my, we both know it was all his work from beginning to end.”

“Now Lizah, if you are saved, and the Lord did it all by himself, let me ask you one more question. Did he do it on purpose, or was it an accident?”

Salvation was no accident; it was purpose by a holy, just and loving God.

I have heard some non-Christian people mocking Christianity by saying, “Well, if I’m among the elect I will believe!” My answer to them is that God has commanded all men everywhere to repent or face a judgment. In eternity, no man will accuse God of being unjust for not being among the elect. The sinner in eternity will be very conscious of his own rejection of Christ.

Just as firmly as the Bible teaches election, it also teaches man’s absolute need of receiving Christ as Lord and Saviour. If you will trust Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you will then come to realize your election of God!