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# The Responses to God's Election

## Romans 9:15-33<sup>8</sup>

### *Russ Kennedy*

The doctrine of God's election stirs many passions. Some are horrified and hate the idea. Some are humbled and honor God for His choosing. The debate often centers around whose choice actually determines who is saved. It is often presented as having to decide whether God does the choosing or man does the choosing. On whose decision is salvation actually determined?

Interestingly, the Bible never deals with this topic, this doctrine that way. It never pits man's choice over against God's choice. The Bible actually rarely talks about the role of man's choice in salvation. But it talks a lot about the role of God's choice. This is where we are today.

I want to remind of some words that will guard our hearts as we wrestle with truth and Paul's answers to the common objections.

Gratefulness for what we have learned. We must never come to a point where what God has taught us fuels pride, arrogance and a condescending tone to others.

Generosity with those who are having an honest struggle, but are engaged with the text of the Word of God.

Guarding what we must teach, with conviction and without compromise. We must never treat truth as though it does not matter. It does.

Graciousness when opposed knowing that our responsibility is to teach and instruct and then wait on God to change hearts.

What has Paul said before that raises the, "So what do we say to these things..."

God's unchanging love that nothing can separate us from.

God's choosing Israel to be a special people group, to represent what it means to be God's people.

God's choosing individuals to be His people, from Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob.

God's plan to save a people for Himself from both Jews and Gentiles with the setting aside of Israel as a nation.

God's purposes to save people based on His promises and not on physical descent.

God's purpose to glorify Himself by removing the grounds for any human boasting.

These truths raised objections in the church at Rome. They raise similar objections, just stated differently.

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## The Challenging Problems

(v.14-26)

Now certainly, this raises problems, questions and sometimes, loud and vociferous challenges. Paul anticipates them and responds to them.

Most people who object to the doctrine of election do so along the lines of one or both of these categories. Further, if your doctrine of election does not raise these objections or is not vulnerable to these two objections, then your doctrine of election cannot be said to be the same as Paul's. I am not saying this to be arrogant or condescending – I am saying this because this is exactly how Paul anticipates people will respond to what he has just written.

Both of these objections are connected to what he has taught with the phrase, "What shall we say, then..."

### *God is not fair to us...*

(v.14-18)

<sup>14</sup>What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! <sup>15</sup>For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." <sup>16</sup>So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. <sup>17</sup>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." <sup>18</sup>So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

### The Objection Stated

Paul recognizes that people will say that this is not just. In our modern day, because we fail to distinguish between humanistic fairness and Biblically oriented justice, we say, "This isn't fair. Your doctrine of election is not fair because Esau (and by implication, other people) don't have a chance or an opportunity to accept or reject God."

When we say this, we are accusing God of injustice. We are establishing a standard of justice that is different from God's and then rejecting what Paul is teaching based on that. Paul is emphatic that what he has just taught is not contrary to God's justice. This is not a world in which everyone having an equal opportunity to accept or reject God is the standard for fairness. This is very hard for us, particularly when our sense of social justice runs so much along the track of equal opportunity. Equal opportunity is an illusion, both socially and spiritually. And to raise it up and charge God with injustice or to reject election as true because of it is not wise.

### The Response Developed

This is why Paul responds as he does. What is interesting to us is that as he develops his response, he actually ratchets up the emotion factor.

Listen to what he says: God is free to show mercy and to harden whomever he chooses. He did this with Pharaoh. And God did it in order to accomplish His purpose and to proclaim His Name. Now we have to stop and think about what Paul is saying. God is sovereignly free to give mercy to anyone He chooses. He is under no obligation to show mercy to anyone. He shows mercy and hardens according to the good pleasure of His will.

Drawing from the book of Exodus, Paul illustrates God's freedom and purposes. God raised up the man we know as the Pharaoh. He ruled Egypt in the days God chose to deliver Israel from slavery there. God chose to harden Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardened his own heart. God does this to demonstrate His power and to declare His character. There is a long trajectory of God's purposes to have His great Name proclaimed in all the world, to all the peoples.

So, to those who say, "It is not fair," Paul responds by saying, "God is free – free to show His mercy to whomever he wishes so that He is glorified – His power and character are acknowledged and acclaimed."

### ***God cannot blame us...***

***(v.19-26)***

When we respond to "It is not fair" with "God is free", then that leads to the next objection.

<sup>19</sup>You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"

<sup>20</sup>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?" <sup>21</sup>Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? <sup>22</sup>What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, <sup>23</sup>in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— <sup>24</sup>even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? <sup>25</sup>As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" <sup>26</sup>"And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'

### **The Objection Stated**

If God is doing whatever He wants, then how can He hold us accountable? See how Paul puts this objection: "Why does He still find fault. After all, who can resist God's will?"

I understand how easy it is to wonder if God is choosing to love and save and show mercy on whomever He chooses, then why am I at fault? Why is it that Pharaoh just cannot stand before God and say that the reason he was not saved (or others are not saved) is because God did not choose him and in fact was actively involved in hardening him. I mean, Esau not only didn't have a chance to repent and be saved, but Pharaoh is being hardened by God!

### **The Response Developed**

Well, Paul's response to this objection is quite forthright and unsympathetic. Basically, who are we to object to the way God is? Who are we to object to the way He has ordained things to be? To put it crudely, who are we to even raise such an objection!

He clearly illustrates the nature of reality by using the potter and the clay. It is absurd that the clay should challenge the power, wisdom and purpose of the potter to do

with the clay as He chooses. Doesn't God have the right to do what He wants: to make this clay into any sort of pot He chooses? Would we actually say, "No, God must make all pots equally alike and save those who respond to Him," with the emphasis on MUST? Do you really think you are going to tell God what He is supposed to be like and what the world is supposed to be like?

Now listen to me – I am trying to represent Paul accurately here. I am not trying to over speak this. Look at the text – isn't this what Paul is saying? This is not arrogance or condescending. It is simply the way Paul states his response. It seems to me that while we need to be generous to those who have an honest struggle, those same people need to be generous with us who are wanting to be honest with God's Word, even in the hard texts. I almost wish I could skip the next few verse, but they are integral to Paul's argument and his response.

Now we sense that Paul knows how hard what he is about to say is to swallow. He makes it a question, a "what if." Now he is not proposing this as a possibility, but as the certain nature of the case. How do I know that? Because he supports from the Scripture, citing Hosea. So here is the surprise: rather than softening the argument, he actually presses it home in a harder, more difficult way.

Let me summarize what Paul is saying here as best I can. God will show His own glory in greater way by showing mercy on some vessels while showing a lesser, but no less real glory in His wrath on the other vessels. What is highlighted is not the outpouring of His wrath, but His long patient endurance of people's rebellion and resistance to Him. While His mercy is highlighted as He moves to save those totally undeserving vessels He has chosen to love.

Paul does not shy away from saying that each of these vessels were prepared for the end they suffer or enjoy. If God is free in His mercy and sovereign in His power and purposes, then He is free to do this as well. He concludes with the quote from Hosea to show that God will call a people, the Gentiles, His people. And in the Scripture where the Gentiles were set apart from the Jews as not the people of God, He has set forth that they will be called the sons of God.

At the end of the day, this free mercy of God and His sovereign power and purposes place the Jew and Gentile on the same footing. And this is the lesson we all need to learn and hear and imbed deeply in our hearts. That God saves anyone is sheer mercy and grace. He is under no obligation to save anyone. He could have let us simply go on in our sin to the destruction we justly deserved. But He has revealed Himself as a sovereign and merciful God. Rather than turning away from the God who has revealed Himself to be like this, we should embrace His mercy shown to Jew and Gentile in His effectual promises and elective purposes.

## The Final Proof

(v.27-33)

The final proof that this is an individual and eschatological salvation is offered in the citation from Isaiah 10:22-23.

### *Its Scriptural Content*

(v.27-29)

<sup>27</sup>And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, <sup>28</sup>for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." <sup>29</sup>And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."

Here is the proof that God is moving to save a remnant, a select group from within Israel. No matter how large the nation may be physically, only a few will be saved. And if God does not save this few, then the nation will be utterly destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now, as we move from here into Romans 10-11, Paul has just defined for us who Israel is. It is not the church. And it is not just those who have descended from Abraham or Isaac. It is a remnant of Jews who will be saved by being a part of the body of Christ so that in the last day, every son of Abraham will stand before the God of the whole earth who declare them justified on the account of Christ and chosen by His loving and sure mercies.

### *Its Summary Conclusion*

(v.30-33)

So, what do we say in conclusion?

<sup>30</sup>What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; <sup>31</sup>but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. <sup>32</sup>Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, <sup>33</sup>as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Well, he picks up again that ever present thread in Romans: salvation and justification in God's sight are by faith and not by works. Faith is placed at the center. The Gentiles who were unconcerned about having a right standing with God received it through faith. And national/ethnic Israel did not receive it because they pursued it by works.

God has purposed to place Jesus Christ as the central object of faith and trust. The Jews stumble over that because their trust is in the works of the Law. Those who do believe, do so because God has taken the initiative in mercy and love to choose, call, justify and glorify them. Thus, His word does not fail. His love is steadfast and abiding. And His people are saved by faith in Christ, whoever they are.

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## Reflect and Respond

Now, let me close this with a summary of Romans 9 that reflects what it teaches, does not contradict other texts, proclaims the power and character and fame of God so that we will believe and bow, so that we will not run away from Him but run to Him.

- There is a distinction between the physical descendants of Abraham with their advantages and the spiritual children of Abraham with their election salvation.
- This distinction exists because of God's purposes in election.
- This election is personal (Isaac/Ishmael/Esau/Jacob, Pharaoh) while having corporate and eschatological realities.
- Election taught Biblically will raise two objections:
  - ❶ God is not fair and ❷ God shouldn't blame us; which are answered:
    - ❶ God is free to show mercy as He chooses;
    - ❷ God is sovereign and free to glorify Himself as He pleases.
- Election is aimed to show God's glory:
  - ❶ In a lesser, but still authentic way through His wrath on the lost highlighting His holiness and justice;
  - ❷ in a greater and magnificent way through His freely choosing whom he would save highlighting His love and mercy.
- Election magnifies God and illuminates His glory because it is extended to all people groups – narrower for the Jews in the remnant but broader as it includes the Gentiles.
- The point is to demonstrate that righteousness comes faith, not by worth or works.
- All this is to place Christ at the center of God's grace and glory.

So, I call you to believe in and bow to the God of the Bible. O, love Him for His mercy. Flee to Him for His grace. And Christian, marvel and worship Him for the freeness of His mercy and everlasting love that has been shown to you as He has chosen you, called you, justified you and will one day, glorify you.

**Soli Deo Gloria.**

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## Notes