

Questions About the Doctrine of God's Sovereignty

Romans 9:14-24

Romans 9:14-24 - *"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.' ¹⁶ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.' ¹⁸ Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?' ²⁰ But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' ²¹ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? ²² What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴ even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?"*

Background Notes

Romans 9 is one of the most difficult chapters in the Bible. It's not difficult because it's hard to understand what's being taught, it's difficult because it's hard for the human mind to submit to what is being taught. The fact that the Bible teaches that God chooses some people to be saved, and doesn't choose other people to be saved is not easy to handle. Our natural minds are reluctant to give God the first and the last word concerning our destinies. Somehow we're convinced that in our own human moral strength and natural love for goodness and for God, we would have chosen God and come to faith on our own! But that is not the teaching of the Bible.

Ephesians 2:1-2 indicates very clearly that apart from life in Christ every human being is dead in trespasses and sins, and is walking according to this satanic world system. Now folks, that's not neutral ground, is it? No one in that condition will chose God. You may talk about free will, but a person in that condition has a will that is inclined **away** from God -- and that includes every person who has ever lived.

So God must make the first move if anyone's going to be saved, and that's exactly the point in the example of Jacob and Esau. Romans 9:11: *"for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls..."*

There's not much room for free will in that verse, is there?

Now what was the first logical thought or question that came to your natural mind at this point? “That’s not fair!” If God does all the choosing, then somehow that’s not fair -- God is unjust. Well, guess what? The apostle Paul anticipated our question! Verse 14: “*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?*” The fact that we came up with the very question that Paul anticipated shows that we didn’t misunderstand the teaching here!

Doctrinal Points

1. God's sovereign choice does not make God unfair.

Verse 14: “*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!*” The fact that God chooses some for salvation and doesn’t choose others for salvation doesn’t make God unjust or unrighteous or unfair. Why not? Verse 15: “*For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.”*” ¹⁶ *So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.*”

The key word here is **mercy**! The Scripture quoted in verse 15 is from Exodus 33:19, where God showed mercy to the people after their idolatry in the incident of the golden calf. And the point here is that God would have been just and righteous and fair in wiping out the whole nation for their gross sins of idolatry and immorality -- but He showed mercy! It was His sovereign choice to show mercy. The same is true in our case. We deserve nothing but the wrath of God, but in His mercy, God chose some to be saved. God’s sovereign choice does not make God unfair.

Here’s an illustration. Let’s say that ten people owe you money of varying amounts. No one has the ability to pay, but you choose to cancel the debt of four of these people -- not because of anything that they have done for you, just by your sovereign choice. You didn’t have to choose anyone, but you chose four. Are you unjust or unrighteous in any way? No! It’s your sovereign choice. Remember, justice would have meant that **all** must pay.

Now just in case you didn’t follow Paul’s first example, the Holy Spirit had him give us another example. This one is even a little tougher to handle! Verses 17-18: “*For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.”*” ¹⁸ *Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.*” Wait a minute -- did I read that correctly? Does the Bible say that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and now Paul is applying that to everyone? Yes! Now before you rip this page out of your Bible, go back to the account of Pharaoh in Exodus 4. There you will find that the Scripture says that **Pharaoh** hardened his own heart, as well as **God** hardened His heart. Now how do you harmonize those two concepts? It’s easy -- God allowed Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened. You see, if God doesn’t choose to act in mercy and lead a person to His own choice, that person will be hardened. No doubt about it, because man’s will is not neutral – it is always inclined **away** from God. So when Romans 9:18 says, “*...whom He wills He hardens.*” It’s another way of saying, “those to whom God doesn’t show mercy, He allows to be hardened in accordance with their own sinful choices. And that doesn’t make God unfair. God’s sovereign choice doesn’t make God unfair.

2. God's sovereign choice does not put God at fault.

In verse 19 Paul anticipated our next question. If God chooses to show mercy to some, and the ones that He doesn't choose to show mercy to will never find it in themselves to choose God, then can God find fault with man, and still hold man accountable for not choosing God? Doesn't it seem as though God is at fault somehow? Well that's exactly what you have in verse 19: *"You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?'"* Once again, if we logically come up with that question, it shows that we understand the teaching here precisely, whether we like it or not!

What is the answer? Notice first of all what the answer is **not**: the answer is **not** that God "looked down the corridor of time," and elected those who would freely choose Him. If that were true, Paul would certainly have used that argument here to show that man is at fault and that this question therefore was invalid. The question would be answered and laid to rest. But Paul didn't answer the question that way, because that's not the way it is!

Instead, the first point Paul made is this: "How dare you question God?" Look at verse 20: *"But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?'"* And then comes the illustration of the potter and the clay. *"Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"* What if God wanting to show His wrath, and to make His power known endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath prepare for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy which He had prepare beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?" Now to appreciate the teaching of this illustration in view of what's been said already, visualize a lump of clay on the floor ready to go to the scrap heap. In fact, visualize the lump of clay sitting on top of a trap door in the floor that is labeled "Hell." The lump of doomed clay, obviously, represents fallen humanity. Now the Potter reaches down and from that doomed lump of clay, He takes some clay and makes beautiful plates and cups to put on His table. In the illustration, these are the "vessels of mercy" of verse 23: *"...and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory..."*

Now from that same doomed lump of clay, the Potter makes some waste containers to be used by the Potter for a time in His work, and then they are put out on the scrap heap along with the rest of the useless hardened clay. These are the "Pharaohs" and other ungodly figures of human history that God has used for His purposes. What's the point? The point is that God's sovereign choice doesn't put God at fault any more than a potter would be at fault for choosing to make some containers for his table and some for waste. God's sovereign choice doesn't put God at fault.

Practical Application

Let God be God!

In this section of Romans 9 we've taken a look at the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in reference to man's salvation. It's not easy to understand and appreciate, but remember it's not the whole story. The doctrine of the responsibility of man is taught in Scripture as well. And the Bible does teach that God answers prayer in reference to the unsaved.

But the Bible also teaches, as we've seen, that God in His sovereignty elects to save some and not others. This is hard doctrine! It is "doctrine that must be endured," as we read in 2 Timothy 4:3 *"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers..."*

So let's not "create God in our own image." Let God be God.