

## Is God Unjust?—Part Two Romans 9

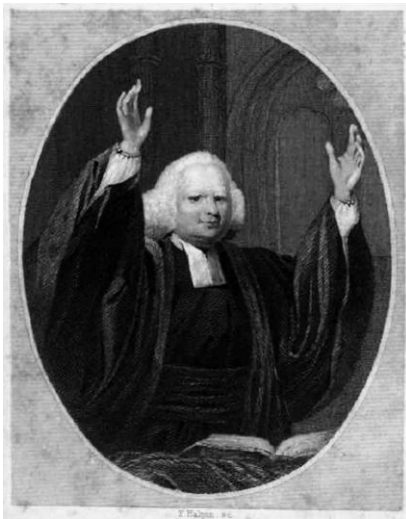
Last week we left off in the middle of Romans chapter nine, a chapter that is often controversial and more often misunderstood. Some of you found yourselves agreeing with me with a hearty “Amen!” while others were a bit perturbed and still others very confused. Before we get back to Romans 9, I want to clear up a common misconception about the doctrine of election.

Some say that if you believe in election you will lose all of your evangelistic zeal. They claim that election destroys your passion for sharing the gospel or for sending missionaries to the ends of the earth, because if certain people are already among the elect, then why do we need to share the gospel? They will come to faith with or without our help, so why bother?

First, this is an abhorrent thought that I reject in the strongest of terms. This false belief is destroyed by any number of Scriptures, but especially by Paul’s own words in the next chapter.

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!” (Romans 10:14-15)

The fact is that Paul taught election but he also taught the necessity of preaching the gospel to the unsaved throughout the world. As you know, he also lived this out at great personal cost to himself.



Second, I have never known or even heard of a single person who believed in election who also took this lazy, fatalistic viewpoint toward evangelism. On the contrary, many of the greatest preachers have both believed in election and preached salvation with all of their might. George Whitefield, who was the subject of my annual biography two years ago, preached approximately 20,000 sermons during his lifetime. He averaged one and half sermons every single day for 35 years, almost all of them preached in the open air of the small towns in America. He preached to the common people—the coal miners, African slaves and farmers about their need for Christ. At Whitefield’s funeral, John Wesley said, “Have we read or heard of any person since the apostles, who...called so many thousands, so many myriads of sinners to repentance?”<sup>1</sup>

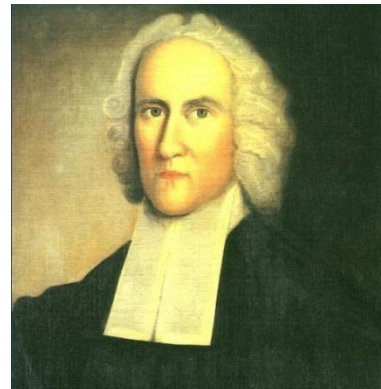
Wesley’s kind words are so significant because John Wesley and his brother Charles vehemently disagreed with Whitefield on the doctrine of election. So strong was their disagreement that the Wesley brothers single handedly destroyed Whitefield’s reputation in London while he was ministering in America. The fact that Wesley so readily acknowledged Whitefield’s concern for the lost demonstrates that election and laziness in regard to evangelism do not hang together.

Further, their example shows what humility can look like in the midst of disagreement. Though Wesley had unkind words for Whitefield at times, they repaired their relationship some years later. We can disagree and be kind. We *must* be kind when we disagree. This issue has similarities to the topic of creation, whether the earth is six thousand years old or billions of years old. I hold strongly to a young earth and I will try to convince you of this, but young earth creationism is not in our statement of faith. Similarly, I have my strong convictions about election and I will try to convince you of what I understand to be the truth of election, but this doctrine is not spelled out in our statement of faith and we must NOT break fellowship at any level over this. We have to be even more cautious than with the issue of creation because the doctrine of election stirs up emotions more quickly and more deeply than most anything I can think of. This topic is like a giant blender and last week I hit the “on” button.

Another type of humility that is necessary is to humble ourselves by placing ourselves underneath the Word of God. I am beholden to the word of God and if Scripture clearly teaches something different than what I am used to, I need to humble myself and accept the truth, whatever issue we are discussing. Furthermore, if there is an apparent contradiction between this chapter and what you have been taught, first of all, recognize that it is an apparent contradiction because it is not possible for Scripture to actually contradict itself. Second, if you find an apparent contradiction, why would you assume that the doctrine of election is wrong and what you have believed all of these years is right? Maybe it is the other way around.

Jonathan Edwards was a contemporary of Whitefield who also believed in election and also called myriads of sinners to repentance with words like these.

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.<sup>2</sup>



Charles Spurgeon was the famous London Baptist preacher and teacher of election who called sinners to repentance in this manner.

Oh, that you would trust in the Lord Jesus! Repose in him, and in his finished work, and all is well. Did I hear you say, "I will pray about it"? Better trust at once. Pray as much as you like after you have trusted, but what is the good of unbelieving prayers? "I will talk with a godly man after the service." I charge you first trust in Jesus. Go home alone, trusting in Jesus. Go to your God at once, even where you now are. Cast yourself on Christ, now, at once; ere you stir

an inch! In God's name I charge you, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

(In addition to these, we have many modern preachers who hold to the doctrine of election, including John MacArthur, R.C. Sproul, John Piper, Alistair Begg, D.A. Carson, James MacDonald, Albert Mohler, J.I. Packer, Wayne Grudem, C.J. Mahaney, Martin Lloyd-Jones, Ray Ortlund, John Stott, A.W. Pink, Erwin Lutzer and Crawford Loritts, just to name a few.)

Each of these preachers believed in the sovereign choice of God through election and each of them preached lived and died with the gospel call on their lips. It is a false accusation to say that election causes a person to stop sharing their faith.

Let me give you an example from the California Gold rush. Let's say that you are living in Wisconsin in 1848 and you heard about gold being discovered in California. You decide to pack up your belongings and head off to San Francisco and you arrive in 1849—you're a San Francisco 49er! You brought enough money with you to purchase a small tract of land next to a stream so you can pan for gold and strike it rich. The man who is selling land offers you several options and says, "This here's a nice piece of land. Joe Smith found a sliver of gold about a mile from here last summer. John and Bill own the piece next to you, but they haven't found even a bit of gold for two whole years. Sign here on the dotted line—and good luck!" So you start to work, eager to find your gold. After six months of sixteen hour days you haven't found any gold, you've run out of money and your food stores are almost gone, so you decide to pack up and head for home.



Now take this same scenario but this time the guy selling you the piece of land says to you, "I absolutely guarantee that you will find gold on this land. Joe found a bunch and just last week John and Bill found forty pounds right next to your land. Young man, you will find gold on this land." How motivated would you be to look for gold? Do you see, because of his sovereign choosing in election, God has guaranteed that people will be saved. When Paul arrived in the city of Corinth, the Lord said to him, "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9-10). Do you see the incredible gift that the Lord gave to Paul? The lord gave him a guarantee of success. How did Paul respond to this great gift? The next verse tells us. "So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God." He ministered in Corinth longer than any other city except Ephesus. He stayed in Corinth and was motivated to preach the gospel because of this guarantee of success.

I am not suggesting that every time we share the gospel we will have the privilege of seeing someone converted, but if we do it enough times, with very few exceptions, we will have success because God has a chosen remnant of his people, not only in ancient Corinth, but throughout the modern world. Belief in the doctrine of election, far from destroying motivation to evangelize it will strengthen our motivation.

With that common objection answered, let's get back to Romans chapter nine. Last week we left off in verse sixteen but I wanted to make a few comments about verses 10-13.

<sup>10</sup> *Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac.* <sup>11</sup> *Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand:* <sup>12</sup> *not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”*<sup>d</sup> <sup>13</sup> *Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”*

Some will stop here and say that I've got it all wrong because if you go back to Genesis 25 where Paul lifted this quote in verse twelve, we see that Moses was speaking about Jacob and Esau as symbolizing nations, not about them as individuals. We read this two weeks ago, but let's look at it again.

<sup>23</sup> *The LORD said to her,*  
*“Two nations are in your womb,*  
*and two peoples from within you will be separated;*  
*one people will be stronger than the other,*  
*and the older will serve the younger.”*

Clearly Moses was referring to Jacob and Esau as referring to two nations. Jacob became the father of the nation of Israel and his brother Esau became the father of the nation of Edom. Furthermore, in 9:13 Paul quoted from Malachi 1:2-3 and in that context, Malachi was also referring to the nations of Israel and Edom.

This fact is prominent in the viewpoint of those who disagree with election unto salvation. They claim that since the context of these two quotes Jacob and Esau are symbolized as nations and not as individuals, then all of chapter nine must be referring to nations and not individuals. Therefore, such a viewpoint claims, election is not unto salvation but merely results in special blessing. This conclusion is wrong for several reasons.

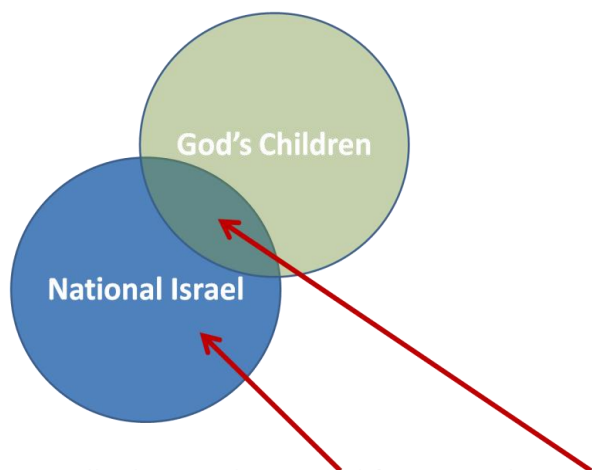
First, election is always election unto salvation. In Romans 11:7 Paul wrote, *What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did.* Paul is making a clear distinction between Israel and the elect. If Israel as a nation has been elected, how could such a distinction have been possible? Furthermore, let me read from the first chapter of Ephesians and I'll let you decide what election means.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he **chose** us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be **adopted** as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have **redemption through his blood**, the **forgiveness of sins**, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding (Eph 1:4-8).

Do you see the rich, salvation language here? Adoption, redemption through his blood and forgiveness of sins. Election is unto salvation.

“Wait a minute!” you say. “I didn’t see anything about election in this passage.” Verse four has the word *chose*, which is the same word for election. Last week I explained that Romans 9:11, *in order that God’s purpose in election might stand*, could accurately be translated as *in order that God’s purpose in choosing might stand*. In the same way, Eph 1:4, *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world* can accurately be translated as *For he elected us in him before the creation of the world*. They are the same Greek word.

The second reason Romans 9 is about individuals and not nations is because everything Paul has written so far has been all about individual believers as opposed to those who are part of the Jewish nation. Verse six lays this out—*Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel*. We spent a long time last week showing that salvation is by grace, not by race. There is a group of



believers, whom Paul calls “God’s children,” who are part of national Israel but who are also saved. This diagram represents the overlap between national Israel and spiritual Israel; between those saved individuals who are Jews by birth. How can “Jacob” represent the nation of Israel when Paul’s entire argument revolves around making a distinction between the nation of Israel and those Jews who were born again believers?

*Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.* Notice carefully how Paul’s argument fits together. His key statement is in verses 6-7.

Furthermore, Paul quoted from Genesis 25 and Malachi to support his argument

**Key Statement** <sup>6</sup> *It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.* <sup>7</sup> *Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children.*

Next, this key statement is explained through two supporting arguments, both of which apply to “Abraham’s children,” who are born again Israelites.

**Supporting Argument #1** *On the contrary*, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” <sup>8</sup> *In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.* <sup>9</sup> *For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”*

**Supporting Argument #2** <sup>10</sup> *Not only that*, but Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. <sup>11</sup> *Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand:* <sup>12</sup> *not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”* <sup>13</sup> *Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”*

There are several important things to notice in this section.

1. The key statement is about *individual* believers within the nation of Israel.
2. Both supporting arguments are held together by two linking phrases: “on the contrary...” and “not only that...” which means that verses 7-13 all support the key statement.
3. Supporting argument #1 is about Abraham, Sarah and their son Isaac (above, in highlighted in blue). These are clearly references to individuals and not nations.
4. Supporting argument #2 is about Isaac, Rebekah and their two sons, Jacob and Esau. These are also clearly references to individuals and not to nations.
5. In verse 9 Paul quoted from Genesis 18—*At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.*”—and he applied the verse to specific individuals. God made a distinction between Isaac and Ishmael. The promise was to come through Sarah’s son Isaac. The promise was to come through Sarah’s son, not Hagar’s son.
6. In verse 12 Paul quoted from Genesis 25—*“The older will serve the younger—*but he applied the verse, not to the nations of Israel and Edom, but to specific individuals, Jacob and Esau. Paul calls them “Rebekah’s children” and “the twins.”
7. In verse 13 Paul quoted from Malachi 1—*“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”*— but, as he did throughout the chapter, applied it to specific individuals.
8. Since we have already established that election is unto salvation, if God’s love toward Jacob was given to the *nation* of Israel, then it would also have to mean that all Israel is saved. This would go against Paul’s key statement in verse six, not to mention the rest of the book of Romans and the rest of the New Testament.
9. Finally, in Genesis 27 when Isaac blesses Jacob and Esau, Isaac said to Esau, “You will serve your brother.” Isaac’s statement was not limited to the nations of Israel and Edom but was very specific that Esau would serve his brother Jacob—*the older will serve the younger.*

So while it is true that in their original contexts there was clearly a national application of Jacob and Esau as Israel and Edom, when Paul applied all of these Old Testament passages, he was clearly using each of these people as examples of individuals. Therefore we can conclude that God chose Jacob the person not Jacob the symbol of the nation of Israel. In other words, Jacob was part of “the elect” and Esau was not. God did not base this decision on anything either of the twins had done because the decision was made prior to their birth. In other words, God has the freedom to make such decisions completely independent of man.

We touched on it last week, but I want to return to verses 14-16 for a bit.

<sup>14</sup> *What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!* <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>f</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.*

Verse fourteen is one of two hypothetical objections raised by Paul and to which nearly every reader can readily relate. I want to make sure we get the full force of this objection. The phrase, “Is God unjust?” does give the full shock of this question. Paul used the word *adikia* (ἀδικία), which is almost always translated as wickedness, unrighteousness, evil or sin. So literally Paul’s question would read “Is there wickedness on God’s part?” Paul is not just asking “Is God unjust or unfair,” although by themselves they would imply sin, but he is asking if God has sinned or committed ongoing acts of wickedness or unrighteousness in having chosen Jacob over Esau. As I mentioned last week, if God chosen Jacob based upon his future knowledge that Jacob would believe, then there would be no reason for such a shocking question as this one. Or, if the issue were choosing to bestow more blessings on the nation of Israel instead of the nation of Edom, Paul could never have raised such an appalling question.

As I said earlier, John and Charles Wesley were fierce opponents of Whitefield for one reason only—he believed in election. It seems obvious that John and Charles got their negative view of election from their mother, Susanna Wesley. Susanna wrote of her hatred of election in a letter to her son John. “The doctrine of predestination... is very shocking, and ought utterly to be abhorred, because it charges the most holy God with being the author of sin.”<sup>4</sup> This is an interesting charge she lays down because as we have seen, it is the same objection raised by Paul—*Is God practicing unrighteousness? Is God the author of sin?*



Susanna Wesley

Tell me—has God has sinned or committed ongoing acts of wickedness or unrighteousness in having chosen Jacob over Esau? Paul’s answer is an affirmative “Not at all” which the King James always translates as “God forbid.” In modern vernacular we would say, “You gotta be kidding me!” Of course God did not sin by sovereignly choosing Jacob over Esau. Paul proved that God was not sinning in the next two verses.

*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>f</sup>  
<sup>16</sup> It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.*

Notice what Paul did not say here. He did not say “Of course God did not commit unrighteousness, because his choice was based on his knowledge of future actions on the part of Jacob and Esau.” If there ever was an opportunity to get God off of the hook, this would have been it. But rather than softening his answer, he strengthened it by showing how God is absolutely sovereign over all such decisions. *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.* Doesn’t that sound like God is in control of distributing his own mercy? Once again we miss something in our English translations. God doesn’t merely “have compassion” or “have mercy” on us, rather he *compassions* us and *mercies* us. The words for compassion and mercy are verbs but we do not have verb forms for these words in English. Verse fifteen literally reads, “*I will mercy on whom I mercy, and I will compassion on whom I compassion.*” He is doing the action to us. We are passive participants in his active mercy. This is followed by the powerful summary statement in verse sixteen. *It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.*

Let's make this very personal. How did you get saved? Paul reminds us that it did not depend on your desire or your effort but on God's mercy. Do you see the difference that this makes? If God made me alive even while I was dead in my transgressions and sins, as Ephesians testifies; if God caused me to pass from death to life, as Jesus said in John 5, then my gratitude for his salvation increases all the more. As an unbeliever, I was dead. And what does a dead person do? Nothing. My salvation did not depend on my desire or my effort but on God's mercy.

As I said last week, we should have already been in agreement that there is such a thing as election, that some are elect and some are not, but where we may have disagreed is whether or not God's election depended on human merit, whether foreseen or otherwise. If his election was based on his foreknowledge, then you would ascribe to the following belief:

**I believe, therefore God chose me.**

After looking in depth at Romans 9 for two weeks, do you still think this belief is possible? However, if God elects us from eternity past, which is taught in Ephesians 1, you have to reverse the order and you get:

**God chose me, therefore I believe.**

The first one places man in charge of salvation and the second places God in charge. But this raises another objection that some have to the doctrine of election—"what about all of the verses that say we are supposed to believe and place our faith in Christ?" Of course you have to believe. Earlier I quoted from Romans 10.

*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!" (14-15)*

Let me explain how we can hold together the doctrine of election, the necessity of preaching the gospel and the necessity of faith in Christ alone for salvation. God has ordained the end, election unto salvation, and the means to the end, preaching the gospel, repentance and belief. The gospel must be preached, and when it is proclaimed you say it like Paul did in chapter ten. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." You tell them what Paul told the Philippian jailer. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). You can preach the gospel and you can share your faith with all of your heart because you know that it will be successful—because God has ordained from eternity past this his word cannot and will not fail.<sup>5</sup>

The promise of success means that we can preach the truth in love and God will convert his people. This keeps us from doing all sorts of gimmicks and tricks to get people into the pews, like one church did (they hosted a sanctioned [rodeo inside their church sanctuary!](#))

The other benefit of the doctrine of election is humility and gratitude. Listen to how one of my friends describes the impact on his life.



My natural state is one of treason, evil, and unspeakable tendencies. Apart from Him I am a murderer, a rapist, a thief. I am racist, prejudiced and genocidal. I will not tell the truth, I subvert justice, and I will take an orphan's last scrap of food and clothing and grind them under my heel if it would benefit me. And yet He chose me. His perfect son lived a life I could not and suffered the penalty I need. WHY? WHY? WHY? The beauty of election is that it is unfair. Were it not unfair, I am in hell right now. We all are. Praise God for his Grace; both Common and Redemptive.

When he says that it is "unfair" he means that it was not fair to Christ that he would have to suffer on our behalf.

Hopefully you are seeing the clarity of the Scripture and the benefits of the doctrine of election. Rather than destroy our concept of God and motivation for evangelism, it elevates God in his majesty and glory and gives us confidence in all of our evangelistic endeavors.

Rich Maurer  
July 18, 2010

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<sup>1</sup> Deep Mourning, Christian History, Issue 38, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Enfield, Connecticut, July 8, 1741.

<sup>3</sup> Spurgeon's sermons, Volume 30.

<sup>d</sup> Gen. 25:23

<sup>e</sup> Mal. 1:2,3

<sup>f</sup> Exodus 33:19

<sup>4</sup> A.W. Harrison, *Arminianism*, London: Duckworth, ©1973, p. 189.

<sup>f</sup> Exodus 33:19

<sup>5</sup> An excellent resource for understanding how to hold God's sovereignty and free will in tension is J.I. Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. It is the single best resource I have ever read on the subject.