

## **Is God Unjust?—Part Three**

### **Romans 9**

For the past two weeks we have been looking verse by verse at the ninth chapter of Romans. Some would call this a debate between Calvinists and Arminians. I have avoided these labels because it has not been my intention to turn you into Calvinists. In fact, as far as I can remember, this is the first sermon I have ever preached in nine years that I have used the word Calvinism. My desire, as always, is to be as faithful and obedient as I can to the clear teachings of Scripture. Remember that we landed in Romans 9 because it was so relevant to our study in Genesis. I am doing with Romans 9 what I have done all through the series on Genesis—I take an occasional excursion into Romans, Galatians or Hebrews to help us better understand Genesis and to see the big picture and consistent message of all of Scripture. My goal these three weeks has not been to debate Calvinism vs. Arminianism, but to carefully exegete Romans chapter nine. In the process, there have been a lot of good questions and a lot of misunderstanding. I want to address a few of these.

First, let me address the labels of Calvinism and Arminianism. A consistent Arminian holds to beliefs that I hope none of you believe, such as the belief that a Christian can lose his or her salvation. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I would describe the key differences between the two sides in the same way I did last week. Below is the defining belief of both views.

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

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

As I use both of these labels what I mean by them is to distinguish between these two core beliefs and I don't intend to compare every belief that both view holds because that would be beyond the scope of Romans 9.

More than one person wondered why I listed the names of several pastors and authors who share my beliefs. The assumption in the question is that I did it to bolster support for my viewpoint. If I can list more people who hold to my view than you list for yours, then I win the day. Had I done this, I would have been guilty of a logical fallacy that says that if the majority of people believe something then it must be true. As Christians I hope we would never fall into such a trap. I used the examples of the pastors and authors because you are familiar with most of them. You listen to them on area radio stations and you read their books. Especially for those for whom this information about election is new, I didn't want you to think I was presenting some strange, esoteric teaching. What I am teaching is mainstream, evangelical belief.

Even though some would like to form the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism, I reject the notion that I am preaching on Calvinism. I am clearly defining the difference between the two core beliefs above, but I am not preaching Calvinism, I am preaching through a chapter in the New Testament. If I am to preach what we like to call the whole counsel of God and as I do that over the years, I am bound to come upon the main chapters and sections that are the center of debate. I can't and won't skip over difficult chapters merely because they are difficult, so when I do preach on them, I must preach them according to how my study and convictions have led me. Some have said that it is divisive to preach on election. Many might be happy if I chose

the Arminian view and preached these texts in that way, but would that not be divisive to those who hold a Calvinist view? My point is that these differences of opinion are unavoidable at times

If I was actually going to preach and defend the view of Calvinism, I could easily take at least six months and work our way through multiple Scripture passages and lay it all out in its full measure. But I am not doing this now, I have not done it in the nearly ten years I have been your pastor and I have no intention of ever doing it.

Next, I want to address some confusion over how to interpret the Bible. A core principle of hermeneutics or Biblical interpretation is that we must always compare Scripture to Scripture. However, first we must determine what each individual text is saying *before* we compare it with other Scriptures. If you don't proceed in this manner, you will always fall into what is called eisegesis—importing your preconceived meaning and viewpoint into the text instead of exegesis—which is extracting the true meaning out of the text. For example, some told me that my view is incorrect and they did it by showing me another Scripture in the New Testament that seems to be at odds with my understanding of Romans 9. This is valid and important but it is not the right place to start. First we must determine what Paul is teaching in the ninth chapter of Romans. I have laid out in great detail the way in which I understand this chapter. If you want to be a good Berean and search the Scriptures, and I know so many of you do, then we must start with the text in hand. Out of all of the questions, comments and accusations I received over the past two weeks, only one person has interacted with me on Romans 9. Only one person! If I have a wrong idea, then please show me where I have gone wrong in my preaching of Romans 9. Please come to me directly with your questions. I have a sense that there is some chatter and gossip happening behind the scenes and this is a thousand times more dangerous than anything I will say in these three weeks.

Furthermore, we have to be very careful about this danger of eisegesis. Eisegesis is like wearing rose-colored glasses—everything you see will be tinted a rose color. Likewise, when we bring our preconceived notions into the text we are studying, it is almost impossible to see the proper meaning of the text. For example, if a person believes that you must have faith in Jesus to be saved but also holds out hope that God could save people without ever hearing the gospel of Christ, then this is the lens with which they will view every verse in the Bible. If you attempt to point out all of the passages where the exclusivity of Jesus Christ is clearly taught, without a special work of the Holy Spirit, it will be impossible that they will be able to change their opinion despite a mountain of evidence. Years ago there was a person in our body who came to believe in Christian Universalism. This is the belief that Christ is the only who saves but those who don't know Christ when they die will only suffer for a while in Hell and eventually everyone will go to Heaven. No matter how many rock solid Scriptures I presented to this person, she would not and I would go so far as to say could not see what I was trying to show her. She looked at every verse in the Bible through her lens of Christian Universalism and nothing could penetrate her preconceived beliefs.

Some have said that because this doctrine is new to some and possibly upsetting that I should not preach on it. I refer you to my earlier comments where I said I cannot and will not skip over difficult passages. I will preach many things over the years that are offensive to many people and if I never upset anyone I would have to question whether or not I was preaching the whole

counsel of God. As I said to one person last Sunday, theology should be emotional! These are not just life and death issues they are eternal issues we are dealing with. If some of this turns your world upside down or keeps you awake at night then this is a good thing. Of course I would never want to intentionally cause someone to doubt or get upset, but if this happens in the course of preaching difficult texts then I conclude that the Holy Spirit wants you to grow through this experience. Do you really want me to skip certain passages so that I don't upset some people? Do you realize the ramifications of such a position? Eventually some will say, "Rich, we don't mind if you have opinions about homosexuality but we don't think it's appropriate to share your opinions for the pulpit." Others will say "Do you really have to talk about Hell and the wrath of God so much?" Once you give way to this kind of pragmatism and easy believism you will inevitably and rapidly slide toward full-scale abandonment of the gospel. Fire me or kill me, but I will not go there.

Still others have told me that I should not preach this because it is not in our statement of faith. I thought I addressed this last week in saying it is similar to the young earth position. That is not in our statement of faith either yet I preached on it for several weeks and mentioned it more often than that, yet I never heard one person say that I should not preach on it.

A great deal of what I preach as I work through books of the Bible would not be in our statement of faith, per se. That is the beauty of our statement of faith—it emphasizes the essentials and does not emphasize the non-essentials. This would be much easier if we were a Methodist or Wesleyan church as they are Arminian and would, by their statement of faith, exclude the Calvinist view. This would also be much easier if we were a Presbyterian or Reformed Church as they are Calvinist and would, by their statement of faith, exclude the Arminian view.

But we are not any of these. We are an Evangelical Free Church. We allow for these differences among us precisely because they are *not* in our statement of faith. We can love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and be an Arminian. We can love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and be a Calvinist. This is a great strength of our denomination—that we can teach and proclaim the very most essential doctrines. We must be absolutely united on these essentials, but when come upon a non-essential doctrine we need to figure out how we can hold differing viewpoints and still stay unified in perfect love. One person sent me a very pro-Arminian document that ended with the following warning: *Remember that this is not an essential doctrinal issue. Christians should not break fellowship with one another over whether they are Arminian or Calvinist.* This is exactly what I said last Sunday and it bears repeating so that it cannot be missed. I will not die on the hill of Calvinism precisely because it is a non-essential. One person told me that they would die on the hill of Arminianism. In my opinion, that is a very dangerous place to be. I have shared with you many times my circle of certainty that helps us make the distinction between essential and non-essential doctrines. I define essential doctrines as those for which I am literally willing to lay down my life. Please don't die on either of these hills. Are you really willing to break fellowship over this non-essential doctrine?

I hold to what is called compatibilism—the idea that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are both clearly taught in Scripture and even though in my finite mind I cannot reconcile the two, I view them as compatible with one another. Therefore, I must not ignore one or the other. If you

want to understand how these two can hang together, I strongly encourage you to listen to or read the book I recommended this past week, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. I will never deny the perfect love and mercy of God. I will never deny the majesty and glory of Christ and his cross who calls sinners to repentance and belief in him. I will never deny that we are totally sinful and completely responsible for all of our sin and worthy of an eternity in Hell. Nor will I ever deny God's absolute sovereignty over everything and everyone, including salvation. As a compatibilist, I hold all of these things together in tension.

In a similar way, as believers in this local body of Christ, we must be compatibilists with one another. We will always have things about which we disagree with one another. If they are essential doctrines we must be united on them. It is good and right to not only disagree but also to part company on essential belief. But on the non-essentials we must be united in love. We must disagree in an agreeable manner. This may be the most important application of these three messages. Can we disagree in an agreeable manner? Can we think deeply about God's glorious word together without coming to verbal blows? Will you allow me to preach the whole counsel of God, including my convictions, without jumping ship? Can we love God so passionately and love one another so completely that we will come to not only tolerate but appreciate our differences and show the world that we still have genuine love for one another?

Now we can get back to looking at the text of Scripture. We left off last week at verse 17.

*<sup>17</sup> For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."<sup>8</sup> <sup>18</sup> Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.*

Remember that in this section Paul is still answering the first objection—"Is God unjust?" Is God committing wickedness by choosing some and not others. He quoted from Exodus 33—"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." In verse 17 Paul quoted from Exodus 9, Moses' words spoken directly to Pharaoh. But this time Paul added an additional dimension to God's sovereign power. *Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.* God not only has mercy on whomever he wished he also hardens whomever he wishes.

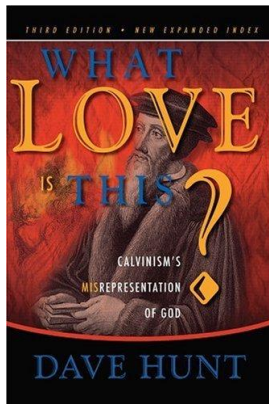
The objection is often raised here is that the Bible says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart and after this God hardened his heart. Therefore, God only finished hardening what Pharaoh had already started. But before Pharaoh hardened his heart, God had already predicted that he would do the hardening. We read God's prediction to Moses in Ex 4:21. "But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go." The Lord had already predicted this would happen a chapter before when he said "But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him" (3:19). How did God know that Pharaoh would harden his heart? Because he told Moses that he planned to harden his heart. Moreover we can know that God did the hardening because it fits into the context of this chapter. Throughout the chapter Paul demonstrates how God's sovereign power acts independently of any actions of men and women.

*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*

**AND**

*It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.*

But this leads us back to the issue of fairness again. Is it fair and just of God to dispense his mercy and hardening as he sees fit? The only problem is that Paul was answering the objection of fairness by using this illustration of hardening Pharaoh! Paul has effectively pulled the rug out from under anyone who would tend to believe that God is not being fair. Remember this—the bottom line answer to the objection of fairness is that God will do whatever he wants. Why do we even struggle with God’s sovereignty over salvation? We allow God to be sovereign over every other area of life, why not over salvation? Is Jesus Christ the supreme one who holds all things together? (Col. 1:15-17) Is the king’s heart like channels of water in the hand of the Lord? Does He turn it wherever He wishes? (Prov. 21:1) Did he speak the universe into existence and breathe life into mankind? We say that the Lord is sovereign over everyone and everything, yet we do not allow him to be sovereign over our salvation. Why is this so?



Since Paul himself eliminated any questions of fairness, some move on to more difficult objections. Dave Hunt has written a popular book which denies election called *What Love is This?* On page 243 Hunt asks, “How could God complain when man does what he predestined him to do? And how could man then be justly punished for doing what he has no capability of *not* doing?”<sup>1</sup> (italics original) Actually, I think that is a well-worded objection which shows a good grasp of the issue at hand. If God predicted that he would harden Pharaoh’s heart and then he actually did harden Pharaoh’s heart, how can Pharaoh be blamed for something that God predicted and caused to happen? How could God blame Pharaoh? How could God blame us when we do evil?

Once again, the apostle Paul anticipated this very question. <sup>19</sup> *One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?”* Do you see, Paul’s hypothetical question is nearly identical to Hunt’s question. Let me tell you how I would like for Paul to answer this question. I would really love it if Paul explained how divine sovereignty and man’s responsibility work together. I know they work together somehow. I know God has it figured out. God still holds Pharaoh accountable for the hardness of his heart and the thumbing of his nose at the Lord and his display of power. Pharaoh was fully guilty of his own wickedness, but at the same time God did the hardening first. But even though he hardened his heart, God did not cause Pharaoh to sin in the sense that God is to be held liable in the same way that we would be liable for causing someone to sin.

A helpful Scripture for this question is found in Acts 4. This is part of a prayer following the release of Peter and John from the Sanhedrin. <sup>27</sup> *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.* <sup>28</sup> *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen* (Acts 4:27-28). The Jews in Jerusalem cried out for Jesus’ crucifixion and Herod and Pontius Pilate gave it to them. All of these people sinned in the most grievous manner and they will be held accountable for their sin. But the disciples add this amazing sentence—*They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.* God didn’t just know that these things would happen, he decided beforehand that they would happen, which means that he made certain they actually happened. Just as in the case with Pharaoh, how could God hold them all accountable if he made it happen? Throughout Scripture, God’s absolute sovereignty and

man's full responsibility are taught side by side. Both are clear and we must not deny one or the other. You see, I would like nothing more than for Paul to answer these tough questions for me. I wished he would have explained these wondrous mysteries to me so I wouldn't have to twist my mind sideways to try to hold them together.

But that's not what Paul did. First, the question again. *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"* And now the answer. <sup>20</sup> *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?* In other words, "Who do you think you are?!!" Paul's response is on par with the way that God answered Job near the end of the book. If you recall, Job spent most of the book defending himself against his worthless friends, strenuously denying his guilt and demanding an audience with God so that he could ask God some pointed questions.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: <sup>2</sup> "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? <sup>3</sup> Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. <sup>4</sup> "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. <sup>5</sup> Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? (Job 38:1-5)

The Lord continued to hammer Job with more questions for four more chapters. This is the classic, non-answer kind of answer. God did not answer all of Job's questions as to why he suffered so much loss and grief. He never explained the heavenly wager from Satan. He did not allow Job to peek behind the curtain of heaven and see all of these mysteries. And we would have the same question in the book of Job as we do here in Romans 9—is God unjust? How could he allow such suffering when Job was a righteous man? The way that God answered Job's questions is very similar to how Paul answers this big question about how God can be sovereign over all of our actions and at the same time hold us liable for our sinful actions. The Bible is clear in stating that our actions are real. We are not robots or puppets on a string. We act freely and of our own will. But the Bible is also clear that God is sovereign over kings and rulers and every part of human history and every iota of the future to come. The Bible teaches both of these and I can't reconcile the two. But when we demand an answer from the Lord, he says to us, *Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?* Just who do you think you are?

Again, similar to the way God answered Job, instead of providing the answers we might like to hear, Paul responded with more questions.

*"Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"<sup>h</sup>*

This question begins to explain why Paul would have answered so strongly in the previous verse. Why is it so wrong to "talk back to God"? Because God formed us and what right do we have to ask him, "Why did you make me like this?" This also gets at the heart of what we might call a "tough question." As I have said many times, there is such a thing as healthy doubt regarding God and the Bible. Healthy doubt is the kind of doubt in a person who has unanswered questions and it's this quest for explanations that drives further study. This is true for all of life. Unanswered questions are the driving force behind all scientific discovery. Why did 50 million people die of a contagious disease in 1918 and 1919? They died of influenza, what was labeled the Spanish Flu, but at that time no one even knew what a virus was. The drive to figure out the cause of the epidemic not only led to the discovery of the virus, but it

also ushered in the science of epidemiology and biological research. Other questions drive the engine of discovery, for example: How can we use rocket power, which had been around for centuries, to send a man into orbit? If this worked, would we be able send them to the moon? What about Mars?

I call this healthy doubt and if you have unanswered questions it is a wonderful thing to search the Scriptures with all diligence to find the answers. Healthy doubt readily answers tough question this way: “I don’t know the answer to that question, but I am going to do my best to find out.” You would think that we could apply this to the age old question of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. I don’t know how these two fit together but I sure would like to know. I wish Paul would have given us a complete, satisfactory answer. But with his own set of questions, Paul uncovered the core of some of our questions—a sinful attitude of the heart. Do we have a right to ask God, “Why did you make me like this?” That is not an attitude of healthy doubt. That is an attitude which questions God’s character, his goodness and integrity. Such a question assumes that God may have made a mistake and that he will certainly thank us if we point out his vast oversight.

This kind of attitude goes well beyond our immediate topic and covers all areas of our life. *Why did God make me like this?* God, why did you make me 5’ 7” instead of 6’ 8” like LeBron James? I could have had a billion dollar contract if you had only made me the right way! Why didn’t you give me more math skills, Lord? I could have been an aerospace engineer and designed the next space shuttle. When we are dissatisfied with our lives we can start to throw all manner of questions at the Lord. We might not even specifically say, “Lord, why did you make me like this?” but our complaining and discontented lives scream out the attitude of our hearts—“I don’t like how you made me. I think you made a mistake. Something must be wrong with you.”

This is the heart attitude that Paul uncovered. The next question is parallel in thought. <sup>21</sup>*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?* This question makes explicit what was implicit in the last—God is the potter and we are the clay. This analogy is lifted right out of Genesis two. “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” I keep calling it an analogy, but that is not correct. An analogy is something that is close to the original and the analogy is given to help you understand the meaning of the original. But the potter clay illustration is not an analogy, it is reality. We are literally clay. God formed us out of dust, but even before the dust was formed and made alive, God created the dust.

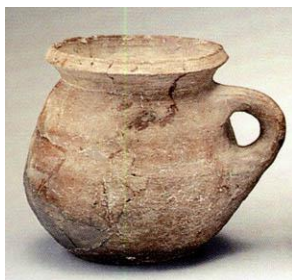
We are pretty familiar with this potter/clay illustration. We sing songs about it. “You are the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me, this is what I pray.” But do we really pray that God would mold us just as he sees fit? Do we really believe that the potter has absolute freedom over us to do with us whatever he chooses? Or do we imagine that the potter is more gentle than this, that he will shape us here and there. The know that this molding process will be painful a times, but we agree to it since the end result will be a good one—we will be molded into a beautiful vase crafted by the Master for his use. We can tolerate the potter and his wheel as long as we like the finished product.





But such a view is a gross distortion of what Paul wrote. *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?* The first thing in this verse that stands out is the “rights” of the potter. Does the Potter have the right to do whatever he sees fit? Is the Potter free to do what he wants? More specifically and more personally, does the Potter have the right to make pottery for noble purposes and for common

use? Isn't this what an actual potter does? In our day, most potters create pieces of art and beauty with the clay. They may make a bowl or a coffee mug that one could argue is used for “common use,” but the pottery illustration is somewhat lost on us. In ancient times, potters would make everything needed for every possible use. The word that is translated as “common”



in the NIV is not the best translation. In most Bibles it is translated as “dishonorable” which is more accurate as it is being compared with vessels of honor. This word also means unclean, disgraceful and shameful. Paul probably had in mind a chamber pot. I realize you can make a chamber pot look pretty. This one is particularly nice. Here is the personal bedroom and chamber pot of Winston Churchill. This is about what the chamber pots in Paul's day would have looked like.

But it doesn't matter how pretty you make them, a chamber pot is still a chamber pot. Where do you think we got the phrase “potty training” from?

Now that you know what a chamber pot is, let's revisit the last question. *Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for honorable purposes and some for dishonorable purposes?* Does the Potter possess this right, even if that means some people will be a chamber pot? Before you answer that, let's make sure we understand what happens to a vessel of dishonor.

<sup>22</sup> *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?* The “vessel of dishonor” molded by the Potter is the same thing as an “object of wrath.” So if we put verses 21 and 22 together we have the question, Does the potter have the right to make a vessel for dishonor that he prepared for destruction? He is the Potter. Does he possess this right? We might be tempted again to insert our primary objection, “But that wouldn't be fair!” but Paul has already answered that objection, hasn't he? *God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.* We might be tempted to insert our second objection, “If God prepares some for destruction, then why does he still blame us?” but that doesn't work either because Paul is using these verses to answer that same objection.

A few months ago we asked two big questions from Genesis 18. The first question was, “[Is anything too hard for the Lord?](#)” to which we answered a resounding “No!” Second, we asked



the question, “[Will not the judge of all the earth do right?](#)” to which we answered an equally resounding “Yes!” Did you mean it when you said it? Nothing is too hard for the Lord so we can agree that the Potter has the right to do whatever he wants with HIS clay. We are *His* clay, are we not? The judge of all the earth will always do right, so if he wants to prepare some vessels for destruction, then it cannot be wrong that he does so.

It does no good to try and explain away the meaning of “destruction” as some have tried. Those who define election as some sort of extra blessing like to define destruction as the absence of blessing. Most of us in this room are not Bible scholars, including me, but does that even sound right to you? Does that verse sound like the absence of blessing? Matthew 7:13-14 are helpful verses for understanding this word destruction. *Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.* This is the exact same word that’s in verse 22. We wouldn’t dare say that the broad road of destruction is simply the absence of blessing, would we?

Here we have another reason why this chapter cannot be referring to nations, as I showed you last week. If Jacob and Esau represent the nations of Israel and Edom, this would mean that all of Israel must be a vessel of honor and is therefore saved and all of Edom is a vessel of dishonor and therefore prepared for destruction. This obviously does not accord with reality and with Scripture.

But this raises another common objection. “God can’t just decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell for any reason at all? God would never arbitrarily choose one person over another.” But who ever said that God’s decides on an arbitrary basis? Do you think he makes his sovereign choice of election based on the color of your hair? Do you think he makes an eternal decision to grant heaven or hell depending on how much sleep he got the night before? Will not the judge of all the earth do right? He does everything according to perfect justice, righteousness and mercy. The Potter chooses, molds and carries out his sovereign will and all that he does is perfectly good. God is all powerful and God is perfectly good. Just because I cannot understand how divine sovereignty and man’s responsibility can go together does not mean that both are not true.

But still others will object and say, “OK, I see that this chapter is pretty clear on the subject of election, but this is an obscure text and this kind of election is taught here and nowhere else. We should not base our doctrine on a single text.” I could show where this is taught all throughout Scripture but let me offer you an example from later in Romans. *What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day”* (Romans 11:7-8). God specifically hardened the hearts of the non-elect so that they could not see the truth.

Moreover, this is what the book of Genesis has been teaching from chapter twelve onward. Abraham lived under the promise but Nahor did not. Isaac lived under the promise but Ishmael did not. Jacob lived under the promise but Esau did not. Why? Because “God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” This is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

But why would God act in this manner? Now this is a good, honest question because it does not assume that God has done something wrong or that God does not have the right to do this. OK, I accept the fact that he has the right to do this, but it would be helpful to know why he does this. Here is one question for which we have a complete answer. <sup>23</sup> *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—<sup>24</sup> even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?* Do you see—he did this for us, for believers, so that we can know the riches of his mercy. God’s sovereign choice in election brings him greater glory than if he waits for us to choose him. If God chooses you based on his foreknowledge of your future faith, then that gives you the final say in salvation. God must wait for you to choose him so that he can save you. He cannot do anything until you give him permission. This makes man to be the sovereign and deciding factor in salvation. Moreover, in this view, God doesn’t actually save anyone, he just potentially saves everyone.

Furthermore, if you were the deciding factor in choosing Jesus, then why did your neighbor not make the same choice? Because you saw the truth and he did not? Because you were more desperate and he was not? You have to answer this question—why did you choose and most people do not? I didn’t choose Christ. I chose Hell. I chose my own way. I chose death and I walked the broad path of destruction. I was dead in my sins and transgressions. But “thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15) “He made known to me the riches of his glory that he prepared in advance for me.” “In love, he predestined me to be adopted as his son through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1) What kind of love is this? I will tell you what kind of a love it is—it is love beyond measure. It is grace greater than all my sin.

This magnification of God’s mercy matches perfectly with verse 17. *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”* Doesn’t every believer want to see the name of Jesus Christ proclaimed in all the earth? Isn’t this why we exist—to bring glory to God in all things? If we have the final say in salvation, who gets the glory? We do. The Potter is most glorified when he mercies and compassions and hardens whomever he wills.

One of the excellent questions I received this week was about prayer. If God is completely sovereign over salvation, then what good does it do to intercede for our unsaved family and friends? Before I answer this question, let me ask it another way. If God is not sovereign over salvation, then why should we pray for unsaved people? You can’t pray a simple prayer like “God, please save them” because if he is not sovereign over salvation then he doesn’t have the ability to save anyone, regardless of how many tears you shed in prayer. I guess you could pray, “God, help them to see the truth. Remove the blinders from their eyes.” Certainly God can do this, but such things will not bring salvation because if God is not sovereign over salvation then man can resist God at every turn. You must conclude that God cannot save anyone. Isn’t that a terribly depressing thought? However, if God is sovereign over salvation, then we must pray for our unsaved friends and family for the same reason that we must share the gospel with them. God has ordained the ends and the means. God has ordained that he will save some and God has

ordained that hearing the gospel and praying for people are the means to bringing about his work of salvation. He allows us the privilege of serving with him while he does the work of salvation.

Lest you think that this diminishes our need to respond in faith, don't be deceived. Paul is certain of God's predestination and election of believers, however, he also preaches the gospel at all times with a level of passion that almost begs people to come to Christ. He cries out, "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:20-21). Implore—that's a form of begging and pleading, is it not? Jesus offered, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Likewise, Isaiah sent out an invitation saying, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1).

The gospel must be proclaimed in all the earth and the wonder of election is that God's word will not return void, as Isaiah wrote later in chapter 55.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,<sup>11</sup> so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

How can God guarantee that his word will be effective? Because he is the Potter! He distributes mercy as he sees fit. As Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me" (John 6:37). How can Jesus be certain that all will come? Because he is the Potter!

Earlier I quoted two verses from the prayer of the believers in Acts 4, when they confessed—*They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen*. Interestingly, the prayer of these believers begins with the title "Sovereign Lord" which is based on a single Greek word, δέσποτα (despota), which is the origin of our English word *despot*. These believers obviously did not have any trouble calling God a despot—the Absolute Sovereign One. In fact, this was the thing which gave them great comfort in their time of persecution. Nothing was outside the will and power of God, so why should they fear the threats and whips and swords of mere men?

Here is the ultimate application of Romans 9—Do you trust God enough to call him despot? Are you willing for him to be the Potter and you the clay to do with you as *he* truly sees fit, not as you would want him to do, not in the way that you would define fairness and justice, but as he defines them? This chapter, and if we are honest the entire Bible, removes you and I from the throne. It takes us off of the throne and allows God to reign there all by himself. I admit—it is painful to be dethroned. God is not unjust. He is the Sovereign despot over the universe. He is the greatest possible good and can do no wrong. He is love and mercy and justice. This is the God I am seeking to trust and obey.

Rich Maurer  
July 25, 2010

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 9:16

<sup>1</sup> Dave Hunt, *What Love is This?*, ©2006 by The Berean Call, Bend Oregon, p, 243.

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<sup>h</sup> Isaiah 29:16; 45:9