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Romans Nine & Divine Election

by David Dunlap

Paul sets forth God's free and sovereign election of the Jewish people in Romans chapter 9. Israel is God's elect and His promises to her have not failed. He argues that the spiritual condition of Israel does not prove God's unfaithfulness. He proves that this is in accordance with the Old Testament. This election does not extend to the eternal salvation of men, but is solely concerned with the purposes of God for Israel. Theologian Erich Sauer explains:

*Romans 9 does not deal with the call unto salvation but to certain purposes connected with the history of salvation. It speaks less of God as a Redeemer of the individual than of Him as the One who directs general history.*¹

National Privileges

Paul begins by revealing his great love and sorrow for the Jewish people. His great sorrow is because of the Israel's refusal to accept Christ as her Messiah. He unfolds Israel's wonderful God-given blessings. He lists the privileges of Israel: adoption as sons, divine glory, promises, covenants, giving of the law, sacred worship (Greek - *Latreia*), and the fathers. Saving the choicest for last, he says, "from whom, according to the flesh, came Christ." He stresses that although Christ was touched with infirmities, He was untouched with sin. The point of the apostle is that although the greater portion of the Jews have rejected the Messiah, the promises of God are nevertheless still in force.

The Choice of Israel

Paul anticipates the Jewish objection: if God's promises to His people are still in effect, why then has the majority of the nation rejected Christ? Has God's Word failed? Paul replies that the promises are still in effect, "Not as though the Word of God hath taken none effect"(v. 6). God's promises to Israel have not been forgotten. God in His sovereignty has determined that they should be fulfilled, not in the entire nation, but in a smaller group within the nation. God has chosen a remnant in Israel, Isaac's seed, on which to bestow His favor. God sovereignly chose between Abraham's sons, Isaac over Ishmael, the seed of the nation of Israel. Election to salvation is not the issue. If election was to salvation, then only the nation of Israel would be saved, since only the nation of Israel was elect. This cannot be the case, for many Gentiles have come to repentance. Election here is to a specific role, function, and purpose.

The Choice of Israel is Explained

God sovereignly chose Jacob's descendants to be a nation that He would use for His eternal purposes. Not all the children of Isaac and Rebecca are God's chosen people, but only those who descended from Jacob (not those of Esau "the

"God speaks of the elect nation as 'Israel, My Glory.' He has chosen that nation above all the nations of the world for His glory. He loves them with an everlasting love. In His plan, God has chosen Israel to be a holy and everlasting nation."

Lewis S. Chafer
(1871-1952)

children of the flesh.”). The children of Jacob are “the children of promise...counted for the seed”(v. 8.) The basis of the election of Israel through Jacob, and not Esau, was not upon works, but upon God’s divine prerogative. Paul states, “For the children being not yet born, neither having done good or evil...”(v. 11). This divine prerogative is confirmed in Romans 9:13, where Paul states, “As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” This quotation from Malachi 1:2-3. The hatred and love spoken of here is not directed to individuals but to the descendants of the nations represented in Jacob and Esau. It refers privilege on earth—not election to salvation. William MacDonald writes:

‘I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau.’ Here God is speaking of two nations, Israel and Edom, of which Jacob and Esau were heads. ...This passage refers only to earthly blessings, and not to eternal life. God’s hatred of Edom doesn’t mean that individual Edomites can’t be saved, any more than His love of Israel means that individual Jews don’t need to be saved. 2

God blessed the house of Jacob with the law, prophets, God’s presence in their midst, shepherd-leaders, and revelation. All of this was withheld from Esau’s descendants. God righteously chose Jacob, and not Esau, from before they were born; but His judgment upon them was not declared until they had lived out their lives, and their descendants had displayed their spiritual character.

The Choice of Divine Mercy

“I will have mercy...I will have compassion...not of him that willeth or runneth, but of God...I raised thee up that I might show My power...that My name might be declared throughout all the earth”(Rom. 9:15-17). Calvinists, will often point to Romans 9:16 as a proof for the Reformed view of divine election. They argue that election is not based upon he who runs or upon he who wills, but upon the mercy and election of God alone. None will debate that salvation is of God alone or that mercy is unmerited; these both are true and biblical. However, we must resist using Romans nine to prove election to salvation, for the election here is not to salvation, but is referring to God’s sovereign will concerning Israel.

The text Romans 9:15, “I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy,” is a quotation from Exodus 33:19. This reference from Exodus sheds light upon the meaning of this verse Romans 9. Israel had sinned greatly in setting up the golden calf. God’s anger burned hot against Israel, and He declared He would destroy all Israel and start anew with Moses’ seed. God would have been fully righteous and just to judge Israel. Moses, however, interceded for Israel saying, “Lord, why does Thy wrath wax hot against Thy people, which Thou has brought out of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand?”(Exodus 32:11).

God relented and showed unmerited mercy to Israel. Just as God was righteous in showing mercy to the children of Israel, in like manner, He would be righteous in withholding mercy from Pharaoh. In both cases God’s sovereignty would be displayed. Moses and Israel submitted to the will of God and received mercy; Pharaoh hardened his heart and came under the Lord’s sovereign hand of judgment. The eloquent Bible expositor, Alexander Maclaren, explains:

God hardens no man’s heart who has not first hardened it himself. We do not need to conclude that any inward action on the will is meant. Was not the accumulation of plagues, intended to soften Pharaoh’s heart? The same fire softens wax and hardens clay... 3

The Choice of Israelite Vessels

Paul anticipates another question by a Jewish objector: If Pharaoh did what God willed, why then does God find fault? (v. 19). Paul counters that the question is wrong on two counts: in using Isaiah 29:16, he firmly states that finite man is in

“We are not told here (Romans 9), nor anywhere else, that before children are born it is God’s purpose to send one to heaven and another to hell; to save one by grace, and to condemn the other to perdition...The passage has to do entirely with privilege here on earth. It was the purpose of God that Jacob should be the father of the nation of Israel...”

H. A. Ironside
(1876-1951)

no position to question a sovereign God (v. 20, 21); he then adds that God's sovereignty is always expressed righteously, ever tempered with mercy (v. 22, 23).

Paul sets forth the divine right of a sovereign God over the Jewish nation. God has the absolute right to shape and to mold Israel, to execute judgment, and to withhold or to mete out blessing according to His will. Paul draws upon the potter-and-clay analogy from Old Testament passages Isaiah 29:16 and Jeremiah 18:6. God speaks of two types of clay vessels. The vessel of honor is made up of vessels of mercy, and the vessel of dishonor is made up of vessels of wrath. The vessel of honor seems to refer to small believing Jewish remnant and believing Gentiles, while the vessel of dishonor refers to unbelieving Israelites.

If unbelieving Israelites would turn from their unbelief, they would, in God's sovereign plan, become vessels of mercy. If they remain steadfast in their unbelief then they will become vessels of dishonor. If Israel turns from her unbelief, God will turn from His judgment which He plans to execute. However, Israel has not turned from her evil. God has shown Himself to be long-suffering and patient as He holds back certain destruction, desiring Israel to come to repentance and faith. "...endured with much long-suffering the vessels fitted to destruction" (v. 22).

The unbelieving Jews, by their rebellion, had fitted *themselves* to a judgment of destruction. This point deserves strong emphasis. It is noteworthy that the Greek construction of this verse (v. 22) does not ascribe the fitting of the vessels of wrath directly to God, but rather to the unbelieving Jews themselves. New Testament Greek authority W. E. Vine's comment here is important:

The "fitting" is not imputed to God, as if God had prepared these vessels for wrath...God has not created men with a view to their destruction. The form of the word rendered "fitted" is in the middle voice (of the Greek verb), which implies action done by oneself ...there is a suggestion, therefore, that the persons referred to as "vessels of wrath" have fitted themselves for destruction. ⁴

The Choice of a Believing Jewish Remnant

The apostle continues his argument of God's choice of the believing Jews. Paul quotes from the Old Testament prophet Hosea (2:23) as support for his argument, "I will call them My people, which were not My people; and beloved, which were not beloved..." (v. 25). Those who were not "His people," and those who were not "beloved" were the unbelieving portion of the Jewish nation. Bible scholar Dr. Alva McClain, former president of Grace Theological Seminary, comments:

Many think that this passage refers to the Gentiles. It does not. They think that Paul made a mistake and quoted from the Old Testament something that belonged to the Jews and applied it to the Gentiles. He is talking about Israel. "I will call her My people which was not My people." God cast Israel off and then picked her up in mercy. ⁵

Paul continues his theme which runs all through Romans 9, that is, that God has a believing remnant which He will not cast off. Paul demonstrates that the prophets clearly stated that only a remnant will be saved. This is part of God's sovereign plan. He makes use of quotations from the Old Testament to show that this was exactly what the Scriptures teach. Paul quotes from two passages from the prophet Isaiah. The first quotation (Isa.10:22) teaches that although Israel would grow into a great nation, only a small portion of the nation would be saved. "Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved" (v. 27). The second quotation (Isa. 1:9) stresses the faithfulness of God. Even though only a small portion are saved, God nonetheless, has shown Himself to be fully sovereign and gracious. "Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we had been as Sodom, and been made like unto Gomorrah" (v. 29).

*" This passage
(Romans 9:13) refers
to earthly
blessings, and
not to eternal
life. God's hatred
of Edom doesn't
mean that
individual
Edomites can't
be saved, any
more than His
love of Israel
means that
individual Jews
don't need to be
saved."*

William MacDonald
(1917-2007)



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Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639
(813) 996-1053

e-mail
daviddunlap@earthlink.net
web site
www.bibleandlife.org

Indeed, God's ways with Israel have been just and gracious and in full agreement with the Old Testament. However, one question yet remains for the apostle to take up in this chapter: Why did some Gentiles attain to the righteousness that is by faith, while the majority of Israel failed to attain to the righteousness of faith? The apostle closes the chapter with his solemn and probing answer, "Because they (Jews) sought it not by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law." Paul now moves from divine sovereignty to human responsibility. Israel sought to be justified before God by keeping the law, instead of by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They rejected a righteousness according to grace and tried to please God with a righteousness according to works. God sent into the world His Son, who was the embodiment of perfection, who fulfilled the law perfectly. Yet the Jewish nation did not receive Him, but stumbled over the stumbling stone of a lowly Christ because they were expecting a triumphant King. By rejecting Him, they fulfilled the prophetic Scriptures, "'Behold, I lay in Sion a stumbling stone and rock of offense: and whosoever believes on Him shall not be ashamed'"(v. 32-33). Even now, although the nation of Israel has stumbled, God is still saving individual Jews who receive Him by faith.

Conclusion

Finally, no one will deny that this chapter presents its share of difficulties to the interpreter. The weighty subjects of the sovereignty of God and the free will of man are presented equally. Nowhere does God ask us to choose one over the other. They are both from God and are both part of God's divine plan. However, may we humbly suggest that Romans chapter nine does not teach that God sovereignly elects some to salvation and others to reprobation. The Calvinist view of election must look elsewhere for its biblical basis. Romans nine sets forth God's sovereign plan with the nation of Israel concerning her role, privilege, and future upon earth.

Endnotes

1. Erich Sauer, *Dawn of World Redemption*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 148, 149
2. William MacDonald, *Romans*, (Kansas City, KS: Walterick, 1981), p. 103
3. Alexander Maclaren, *Exodus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), p. 36
4. W. E. Vine, *Romans*, (London: Oliphants, 1948), p. 147-148
5. Alva J. McClain, *Romans*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1973), p. 183