

## **“Unconditional Election”**

**Romans 9:6-29**

**March 12, 2023**

---

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Romans 9 is not the only passage in the Bible about the doctrine of election, but it is the lengthiest. Any Christian who believes the Bible must believe in election, for the simple reason that the Bible speaks clearly and frequently about this. Jesus said, “I know those I have chosen” (John 13:18). Where Christians differ is in their understanding of the meaning of election and predestination. To simplify things somewhat, there are Christians who believe the Bible teaches double predestination, the idea that God predestines some to salvation and others to damnation. Then on the other side, some Christians believe that God offers the gospel to all and elects some on the basis of his foreknowledge that they will believe. In this view it is people who ultimately elect themselves, with God responding based on his knowledge of their choice. As we explore the teaching of election in this chapter, I’m going to be making the case that the Bible teaches something between these two. We will explore these things through asking the same three questions Paul asks here.

Before we do that, let me tell you about a friend of mine named Bob. Bob grew up in the Northeast under difficult circumstances, to the point that he was raised largely in the foster care system. He eventually made his way to college and after that to Africa where he served in the Peace Corps. He was not a Christian himself, but he got to know some Christian missionaries there with whom he shared a passion for racquetball. He would occasionally attend their very small church, and one day they invited him to preach the sermon the following week. Not one to be shy about a challenge, he agreed, though he was still not a follower of Christ. God moved in his heart as he was preparing that sermon, and he began his sermon by announcing himself a new follower of Christ. My friend’s name is Bob Osborn, and he is now the Executive Director of Serge, a mission agency with which many of our supported missionaries serve. How do we explain such a path, from foster care system to devoted follower of Christ and mission agency director? The Bible explains it by this doctrine of election.

### **I. Has God’s Word Failed?**

The problem that gave rise to Romans 9-11 is Jewish unbelief. By the time Paul wrote this letter, far more Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ than Jews. Not only were large numbers of Jews rejecting the gospel, but many were responding with violence. If the Jews were God’s chosen people, how might the promises of security in God’s love that Paul had pronounced in chapter 8 be

reconciled with such widespread Jewish unbelief? Had the promises of God's love for the Jews failed? This is the problem Paul addresses in today's passage.

His first answer is to point out that it has always been the case that not all of Abraham's physical descendants were genuine believers. Paul says it like this. **“Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring”** (v. 6-7). He then offers two examples from the history of Israel, beginning with Isaac and Ishmael. Abraham was the father of both, but Isaac and not Ishmael was the true child of Abraham. The distinction between Abraham's two sons was not their paternity, but that Ishmael was a product of human effort while Isaac was a product of God's promise, being born to Abraham and Sarah when both were well beyond child-bearing years. True salvation doesn't depend on human effort but on God's sovereign grace.

The second example is that of Jacob and Esau. Both had the same father and mother, Isaac and Rebekah, and were actually fraternal twins. **“Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’”** (v. 11-13). This is a clear statement of the doctrine of unconditional election. It is why the third view of election I mentioned earlier is not true to the Bible. As a reminder, that view is that God foresees who will believe in him and responds by electing them. But this passage makes it clear that God's choice was prior to their birth and not based on anything good or bad in either of them.

The Old Testament story of these two brothers demonstrates that neither of them had much interest in God and his covenant. Esau is portrayed as violent and impulsive. He was willing to trade his birthright to satisfy his hunger, and he broke his mother's heart because of his love of pagan women. When Jacob stole his father's blessing, Esau vowed to get his revenge. Jacob was no better. He was a deceptive cheater. When he fled from Esau after stealing the birthright, God met with him and gave him that vision we refer to as “Jacob's ladder,” with angels ascending and descending. God then repeated to Jacob the same promises he had given to Abraham, promises of a land and of many descendants. But note Jacob's response. **“If God will be with me and will keep me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God”** (Gen. 28:20-21). His was an instrumental view of God that said, “I will serve you in order to get what I want.” God was reduced to a mere instrument for Jacob to get what he wanted. Another twenty years would be required for Jacob to come to a proper view of God, and likely to true faith. It happened after years of bitter service to a man who was easily Jacob's match in scheming, his uncle, Laban. And it came when Jacob was in a desperate way when he heard that his brother was

coming to meet him with 400 men. The night before he was to meet Esau, God met him again and they had their famous wrestling match. It was a defining moment for Jacob as he said to God, **“I will not let you go unless you bless me”** (Gen. 32:26). That’s a statement of faith. He held on to God even though doing so might lead to his death. He did so because he preferred to die rather than to live without God’s blessing. It had been a long road for Jacob, but the road had finally brought him to faith in God.

We learn an important lesson about election from Jacob’s story. The lesson is that no one would be saved apart from God’s election. It’s not the case that there are people who would come to faith, but God prevents them from doing so for the simple reason that they are not elect. The sobering truth is that not a single person would ever come to God in humble faith apart from God’s gracious intervention.

What about this quote from Malachi, **“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”**? While such a statement sounds shocking to our ears, it should actually be understood as an idiom for preference. In other words, God is saying that he preferred Jacob over Esau. Jesus used the word “hate” in the same way when he told us that we cannot be his disciples unless we hate our family (Luke 14:26). He obviously didn’t mean that we are to despise our family members, because the fifth commandment tells us to honor our parents, which Jesus himself did. What Jesus forbids here is loving family more than him, and what Paul means in quoting this verse is equivalent to saying that God chose Jacob and not Esau.

## **II. Is There Injustice on God’s Part?**

A common objection to the idea of God’s election is that it is unfair for God to treat people differently. Everyone should be the same, we think. If God shows favor to one, justice requires that he show favor to all. The Bible’s view could not be more different. It would warn us away from wanting justice from God, because the just thing for God to do for all rebellious sinners, which by nature includes us all, is to condemn us.

Paul answers this objection by reference to the book of Exodus, where we read of God saying to Moses, **“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion”** (v. 15). Paul is challenging the basic assumption that leads to this charge of unfairness on God’s part. He turns this objection on its head by saying that instead of finding fault with God for not showing favor to all, we should be marveling at God’s grace to show favor to any. It is an extravagant and costly mercy from God that any should be saved, because it cost the life of his dear Son. This is the same point Jesus made in the parable of the laborers. A vineyard owner needs workers and hires men for the agreed upon salary of one denarius for the day’s

labor. Around 9:00 a.m., three hours after the first group was hired, he hires another group and promises to pay them fairly, though he doesn't specify what the wage will be. The same thing happens at noon, 3:00 p.m. and even 5:00 p.m., only one hour before quitting time. When the day's work was complete at 6:00 p.m., the workers gather to collect their pay, and he pays the last ones hired one denarius. Then all the others get the same amount, but the ones hired first complain of unfairness. The last ones hired received the same amount they received, though they only worked one hour instead of twelve. The owner replies, **"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"** (Matt. 20:15).

Verse 16 reminds us that it is God's decision that is decisive, not man's. **"So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."** The decisive role of God is true not only for those who are shown mercy but also for the non-elect. Pharaoh is the example Paul mentions for this. God raised up Pharaoh in order to demonstrate God's power, to the end that God's **"name might be proclaimed in all the earth"** (v. 17). Paul's conclusion, then, is that God **"has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills"** (v. 18).

How should we understand this idea of God hardening Pharaoh's heart? This is a quote from the book of Exodus, which also mentions repeatedly that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So apparently both are true. New Testament scholar Leon Morris claims that in the whole of the Bible, God never hardened anyone "who had not first hardened himself." In essence, God's hardening of Pharaoh is simply abandoning him to his own stubbornness.

To conclude, then, Paul is saying that when people demand justice from God, they are making a poor choice. They should instead plead for mercy.

### **III. How Can God Find Fault?**

If God's will always prevails, as Paul claimed in verse 16, then on what basis does God find fault? Paul answers this question by rebuking the impiety of the question. **"Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?"** (v. 20). Paul wants us to remember our place. God is God, and we are not. There is as much of a gulf between God and man as there is between a potter and a lump of clay. We have no business judging God. It is the same message God gave to Job and his friends, a message to let God be God and not let yourself be God's judge.

C. S. Lewis challenges this eloquently in his essay, *God in the Dock*.

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable

defense for being the God who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God in the dock." P. 323

## **CONCLUSION:**

We should thank God for the doctrine of election, because if God had not chosen some for salvation, no one would be saved. But God has chosen to show mercy. And he pursues relentlessly those upon whom he has put his favor, and it is only because of such pursuit that any of us can be saved.

Two responses are appropriate, and they are gratitude and humility. Humility is appropriate because we realize that our natural state, apart from God's intervention, is to rebel against God and pursue a self-destructive path. And gratitude is appropriate because we realize that there is only one thing that has prevented us from such self-destruction and that is the sovereign, electing grace of God.

One last story illustrates that well. This past week was the anniversary of the conversion of John Newton, the 18<sup>th</sup> century preacher and hymnwriter who authored our closing hymn today. Until age 7, Newton was raised by a Christian mother, and he had sought the Lord. He later became bitter, though, when he concluded that God could not be found by him because his sins were too great. He became a slave trader and was once enslaved by the slaves themselves and almost died. It was another near-death experience that brought him to salvation, in the form of a raging storm at sea. One night Newton was awakened by a violent wave crashing against the ship. Water plunged into his cabin. When he went to the deck, he saw that much of the ship had been wrecked, and water was quickly pouring in. For days, the sailors manned the pumps and tried to do what they could to repair the gaping holes in the side of the ship, all while the storm still raged. It was such a fierce storm that the captain was reminded of the story of Jonah and concluded that there must be a particularly evil man aboard who needed to be thrown overboard. The leading candidate, in the captain's mind, was John Newton. Even among godless sailors, Newton was considered more impious than the rest. By God's grace, while laboring to survive against the persistent storm, Newton remembered what his mother had taught him about Jesus. He wrote later, "I began to pray...to think of that Jesus that I had so often derided; I recollected his death: a death for sins not his own, but, as I remembered, for the sake of those who should put their trust in him." So on March 21, 1747, Newton became the beneficiary of the amazing and electing grace of God.

**Discussion Questions**  
**Romans 9:6-29**

1. Where do you stand regarding this doctrine of election? Do you fully embrace it? Still have questions? Fully reject it?
2. What do you find most encouraging about this doctrine? What do you find most difficult about it?
3. What were some of the pivotal moments or people that God used to bring you to faith in Christ?
4. How would you respond to someone who is troubled by the question, "Am I one of the elect?"
5. What do we learn from the example of Pharaoh about how a person becomes hardened to the Lord?
6. What do we learn from Jacob about how a person comes to faith in the Lord?