

Chapter 8

The Doctrine of Unconditional Election

The Great Giver of Gifts

As I sit to write this chapter, the Christmas holidays are just about complete and a new year begins this very evening. For most individuals, the Christmas season was one of great joy in meeting with loved friends and family members, worshipping the Savior born two thousand years ago, and reveling in all that Christmas is. Another great source of joy in the past week is the anticipation of giving and receiving gifts. As a child, we all remember what it was like to begrudgingly go to bed with almost unbearable visions of what the morning would bring. As we grew older, we began to understand the adage that “it is better to give than to receive.” As unthinkable as that might have been as a child, adults know full well the joy in giving a thoughtful gift to a loved one.

Our Father in heaven also knows full well what it means to give great gifts. The Bible tells us that “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). All Christians know that the greatest of all gifts given by the Father is Jesus Christ. From childhood, believers have been taught that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

However, many Christians are unaware that the Father has also given the Son a gift. We find this acknowledged several times in Scripture by Jesus.

The Father’s Gift to the Son

In John 17, we read a private conversation between Jesus and God (a prayer made known to John through divine inspiration). At the very opening of this prayer, Jesus utters these words:

¹ When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:1-3).

As Jesus sets His face towards the cross, His mind is focused on one thing: glorifying the Father. All is done for that one simple thing: The Father to be lifted high and glorified above all else and glorified alone in the midst of all other things.

We also see that Jesus has been given unassailed, unchallenged, comprehensive authority over every man, woman, and child. All belong to God and God chose some out from among all the others. Those who are chosen were not different from any others – all were

guilty of sin against a holy God. No one has distinguished himself from all others through a bit of goodness in him or any good decision he has made.

With this authority, Jesus states that He is able to bring the Father glory by giving eternal life to people. However, we must note to whom Jesus has been entrusted to give eternal life. Jesus says that He has been given authority to give eternal life to “all whom you have given [Me].” The Father has given the Son certain individuals and the Son then gives eternal life to those same particular individuals. Here we see authority over all in order to give eternal life to some.¹

Jesus goes on to repeat the same idea two more times in this same prayer.

I have manifested your name to the people whom *you gave me out of the world* (Jesus’ disciples). Yours they were, and *you gave them to me*, and they have kept your word (John 17:6).

I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but *for those whom you have given me* (the disciples), *for they are yours* (John 17:9).

It is often stated that Jesus only has His twelve disciples in mind in this prayer. However, His words in verse 20 refute that interpretation. In that verse, Jesus prayed:

I do not ask for these only, but also *for those who will believe in me through their word . . .* (John 17:20-21).

Who are these future believers? How do they come to have eternal life? Do they come on their own or do they have eternal life because they too have been given from the Father to the Son? Jesus continues His prayer, saying:

Father, I desire that they also, *whom you have given me*, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world (John 17:24).

Just as the disciples became disciples and believers in Christ because the Father gave them to Christ, so all true future believers come to faith in Christ because God has also given them to the Son. So, the next obvious question is “Has God given everyone to the Son?” The answer to that question can be surmised from the words of Christ in the sixth chapter of this same gospel.

In the sixth chapter of John, we read several fascinating stories. Jesus feeds the multitudes and then walks on the water to meet the disciples in their boat. Upon landing on the other side, Jesus meets the same people he had fed miraculously the day before. Sensing that these people found Him only for more physical food, Jesus began to explain

¹ Bruce Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation: Unconditional, Individual, and Infralapsarian,” in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2006), 6.

to these “seekers” why they do believe His message. Jesus tells them plainly that they sought only entertainment and satisfaction in their bellies. Going further than most preachers would dare go today, Jesus explained who it was that comes to Him for salvation.²

³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. . . . ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:37-40, 44).

When we connect all the dots, we can make the following observations.³

1. Jesus is not speaking theoretically here. He makes factual statements, the first of which being that the Father gives a certain group to Jesus.
2. God’s action is primary – He is the giver. In this, we see God’s complete ownership of all men. He does with them as He pleases.
3. All of those given by the Father will come to Jesus (not *may come* but *will come* – there is no sense of contingency here!). John’s use of “come” is seen to be synonymous with “looks on the Son” and “believes in Him” as seen in verse 40. The Father gives men to the Son for the express purpose of their certain salvation.
4. We must also note that Jesus did not say that all those given are *brought* to Jesus. Once again, we see divine sovereignty and human responsibility acting together.
5. All of those given by the Father will come *to Christ*. They do not come to an abstract idea. They do not come to a group of people, or creed, or theological system. They come *to Christ*. It is personal and intimate. Those who are given “know His voice (John 10:4-5, 14).
6. If the giving is universal, then salvation is universal.
7. Those who come to Jesus will never be cast out from Christ’s presence. Those given by the Father have been give TO JESUS! The elect have been forever committed to His care.
8. Jesus came to earth to do the will of the Father and that will is that Jesus would lose none of all that God has given Jesus.
9. Instead of losing those given to Him, Jesus will raise that entire group up on the last day. The idea of “raising up” is obviously a reference to the resurrection.
10. Those given will “come to the Son” or “look to the Son” or “believe in the Son.” This obviously involves faith but we must ask, “What comes first: the giving or the coming?” The “plan of salvation” is not to be portrayed as the Father and Son

² Our ability to discuss the passage in minute detail is based on the belief that the entirety of Scripture is divinely inspired and consistent within itself.

³ Many of the observations from James White, *Drawn by the Father: A Study of John 6:33-45* (Crowne Publications: Southbridge, MA, 1991), 16.

passively standing by, patiently hoping that someone (anyone?) will take them up on their offer of the eternal life. No, the Father gives as the initiating and ultimate act. Once the giving has taken place, the elect are “settled” and all those given “will come.” There is no doubt or hopefulness as to the success of this “plan” in the mind of God.

11. In verse 44, Jesus goes on to explain the multitude’s unbelief to the fact that they were not given by the Father to the Son or drawn by the Spirit to the Son. Those who are given will come and they will come because they alone will be drawn by the Father. This same one is said again to be certain of being raised up on the last day.

The Father’s Gift to Men

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard as recorded in Matthew 20, Jesus taught that God is not obliged to deal with everyone in the same way.

¹ For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.” ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.

⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.” . . . ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

¹³ But he replied to one of them . . . ¹⁵ “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

To those who objected to working all day but received the same wage as the ones who worked only one hour, Jesus infers that none get less than they deserve (justice) but some get more than they deserve (grace). It is not unjust of God to give some more than their due.⁴

The Son’s Gift to Men

God gives gifts to the Son and to men. We see in the fifth chapter of John’s Gospel that Christ also gives to men.

⁴ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 124.

¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also *the Son gives life to whom he will.*”

Later, in the tenth chapter, we read this message from Christ:

²⁷ “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

Here we see all these truths come together in one passage. The sheep are those people whom the Father has specifically given to the Son. In turn, the Son gives these same sheep eternal life.

From these passages, we get a glimpse into the doctrine of election. Out of all creation, God gives some to the Son. The Son, acting according to the will of the Father, gives life to those same ones. Those same ones given will be saved and saved forever. This act of giving by the Father to the Son is the doctrine of election.

Election is a controversial topic yet the church cannot avoid discussing it. Election is a biblical term and a biblical concept and the Bible discusses it frequently.⁵ Indeed, the topic appears multiple times in almost all of Paul’s letters. He even begins his letter to the Ephesians, a group of recently converted pagans, with this topic that most Christians today believe should never be discussed at all.

Therefore, the question is not “Does the Bible teach election?” but “What exactly does the Bible teach about election?”

The Doctrine of Unconditional Election

Unconditional election to salvation may be defined as God’s gracious choice, made in eternity past, of those whom He would save by faith through the atoning death of His Son. This choice was based not upon anything that those so chose would do, or any choice they would make, or on how good or bad they might be, or on anything else specifically true about them in contrast to others. Instead, this choice is based solely on God’s own good pleasure and will.⁶

In light of this understanding, we will see that unconditional election specifically denies that God elects persons based upon His advanced knowledge, in eternity past, of their

⁵ Refer to Chapter 7 for a survey of election in the Bible.

⁶ Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” 4-5.

future decision of whether to accept God's gift of Jesus Christ when they hear or read the gospel. Instead, we must say that salvation, which includes election, is *all* of God. As usual, Charles Spurgeon says it well:

I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love.

We see this doctrine most plainly taught in two primary passages: Ephesians 1 and Romans 9.

Election in Ephesians 1

In his introduction to his letter to the church, Paul states that God is to be blessed. Why? The first and second items that came to his mind are our election by God unto salvation: God chose us and God predestined us. Amazingly, what is primary and central in Paul's mind is secondary and neglected in our modern minds.⁷

Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence in the original Greek language. However, this sentence has been broken into five sentences in the English Standard Version and can be divided into three units of thought. Each of these sections is marked by the recurring phrase "to the praise of His glorious grace (verses 3-6, 7-12, and 13-14).

Furthermore, each section is characterized by the work of one person of the Trinity. We see that the Father chooses people for salvation in verses 3-6, the Son redeems them in verses 7-12, and the Spirit is the guarantee of their salvation in verses 13-14. Again, all of this is done for the praise of His glory."

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,⁶ *to the praise of his glorious grace*, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the

⁷ Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 13.

counsel of his will,¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be *to the praise of his glory*.

¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, *to the praise of his glory*.

The theological context for Paul's teaching, and thus the practical context for our understanding of Paul's teaching, is high praise directed toward the Trinity for such a great salvation.⁸ In this passage, we see six truths:

The Timing of Election

Election is pre-temporal. To use the apostle's words, election was "before the foundation of the world" (verse 4). Before creating anything, even time, God the Father chose a people ("us") to belong to Him. Though the idea is not explicit here, it is easy to infer why Paul used such terminology. Paul uses those particular words to emphasize that the divine decision to elect is wholly unaffected by human deeds or decisions.⁹ The election of those whom God will save is God's choice – a choice with which we had nothing to do and could have had nothing to do? We had not even been created!¹⁰ When God chose us, only God was!¹¹ We will see this more clearly when we study Paul's teaching in Romans 8-9 and there determine that the typical evangelical concept of conditional election fails.¹²

Election is not something that waits for any event in human history, not even the faith of man.¹³ The faith of individuals is not the beginning or the cause or the foundation of their election – it is the fruit (as we see in Acts 13:48, which says that "when the Gentiles heard this, . . . as many as were appointed to eternal life believed). The Scriptures tell us that God chose us in Christ from before the foundation of the world, not that He saw us from before the foundation of the world choosing Him.¹⁴ Therefore, we see that election is before all that and all that later occurs in salvation history is the progressive fulfillment of this divine purpose in redemptive history. Election is one aspect of salvation – it is not all of salvation.

The implications of this are profound. An individual can either look to himself and be thankful for his faith which resulted in his election or he can look to God and be thankful

⁸ Peterson, *Election and Free Will*, 103,

⁹ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 107.

¹⁰ Paul will make the same point in Romans 9:11 when using Jacob and Esau as examples of God's election: Paul writes, "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."

¹¹ Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 13.

¹² Conditional election states that God chose people based on His foreknowledge of their future yet certain choice to put their faith in the Son.

¹³ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 107.

¹⁴ Paul Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 73, as found in Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 132.

for his election which resulted in his faith and salvation. When we reflect upon our salvation from a biblical vantage point, election should cause us to react with wonder, praise, and worship.

The Objects of Election

God did not choose abstract categories or hypothetical conditions. He did not say that whoever ends up having faith in Christ will end up being the elect.¹⁵ God did not simply decide *to save* or *to make salvation possible*.¹⁶ No, God elects people, not categories of people or even a plan.¹⁷

The verb translated “chose” in verse four is *exelaxato*, a verb that means “to choose or select for oneself.” It is the aorist tense, indicating the fact of a definitive act of God. It is the Father who chose and what the Father chose was “us” (the direct object of “chose”).

This is a matter of grammar. There are pronouns throughout and they all refer to “us” – the objects of God’s choosing activity.

The Basis of Election

The great question that arises in a discussion of election is “Why?” Why does one man believe and not another? Man’s religions and traditions put the answer firmly in the realm of human choice and/or accomplishment.¹⁸ The Bible gives a different answer and in this passage, more than any other, Paul affirms that God elects His people for salvation on the basis of His sovereign will.¹⁹ Specifically, we may speak of God’s sovereign will to love us, be gracious unto us, and fulfill His purpose in us.²⁰ Paul writes that it is “in love” that God predestined us for adoption” (1:4b). Paul also writes that God does all this “to the praise of His glorious grace” (1:6; also 1:12, 14). It cannot be stated more emphatically that election is based on God’s purposes that are found in Him alone and known to Him alone.

It must further be noted that in this passage there is no mention whatsoever of our faith or our response to the Gospel. Our will and what we do with it is not mentioned, let alone being set up as the determining factor in our election. Instead, God is presented as the active party and the foundation of our salvation. It is the “intention of His will” and not the intention of our will (see John 1:12-13).

¹⁵ This is the “corporate view of election,” best presented in William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) and H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1941).

¹⁶ James White, “Unconditional Election,” in Dave Hunt and James White, *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 92.

¹⁷ Greg Welty, “Election and Calling: A Biblical/Theological Study,” a paper presented at “Building Bridges: Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention,” Nov 27, 2008. Welty is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Southwestern Theological Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. The paper can be downloaded here: <http://blogs.lifeway.com/blog/edstetzer/Welton%20Election%20and%20Effectual%20Calling.pdf>

¹⁸ White, “Unconditional Election,” 93.

¹⁹ Peterson, *Election and Free Will*, 105.

²⁰ Welty, “Election and Calling.”

That God chooses according to the good pleasure of His will does not mean His choices are arbitrary, made for no reason at all. Though His election is not based on anything foreseen in us, this does not mean that God makes the choice for no reason whatsoever. It simply means the reason is not to be found in us. In His inscrutable mysterious will, God chooses for reasons known *only* to Him. He chooses according to His own pleasure, which is His right as God. His pleasure is good pleasure and if something pleases God, it must be good. And as a result, God *alone* receives praise!

Paul emphatically and repeatedly makes this point in his choice of vocabulary. Indeed, we see the Triune God as the active agent throughout the passage. In no way do we see God “responding” to any action on man’s part. Read through these words and determine who is doing the actions in this passage:

- “Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3)
- “[He] has blessed us” (v. 3)
- “He chose us” (v. 4)
- “He predestined us” (v. 5)
- “according to the purpose of His will” (v. 5)
- “to the praise of His glorious grace” (v. 6)
- “with which He has blessed us” (v. 6)
- “In Him we have redemption through His blood” (v. 7)
- “according to His grace” (v. 8)
- “which He lavished upon us” (v. 8)
- “the mystery of His will” (v. 9)
- “according to His purpose” (v. 9)
- “He set forth in Christ” (v. 9)
- “In Him we have obtained an inheritance” (v. 11)
- “predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things” (v. 11).
- “In Him you . . . we sealed” (v. 13)

It is this fact that election is bound up in the person and character of God alone that forces us to speak of election as “unconditional.” Election is not based in any sense on anything found in the person, character, faith, or will of any human being. Election is seated solely in the deliberate, reasoned intent of God. For reasons unknown to us, God was pleased to do it this way and this way ultimately brings Him the most glory.

God is a certain kind of God – the kind who works all things after the counsel of His own will – and it is according to *that* purpose of *that kind of* God that we have been elected. Paul understands and accounts for the spiritual predestination of individuals in light of the broader, more general truth that God works “all things” according to His will. Our particular election is not an anomaly in our portrait of God – Paul sees it as a natural occurrence in his larger doctrine of God and God’s providence.²¹ Surely, then, the notion

²¹ Welty, “Election and Calling.”

of election being conditioned upon something in the creature or some decision made by the creature turns this doctrine on its head.

The fact that we do not like it does not enter into the equation. You may say that you don't like the reason why God chose one and not another?" How can you react against a reason that you do not know? This is the very heart and soul of unconditional election – it is *unconditional* and has nothing to do with either the elect or the non-elect (either foreseen or actual).

Spurgeon attempted to answer this question with the following hypothetical:

I will ask you one question. Is there any of you here this morning who wishes to be holy, who wishes to be regenerate, to leave off sin and walk in holiness? "Yes, there is," says some one, "I do." Then God has elected you. But another says, "No; I don't want to be holy; I don't want to give up my lusts and my vices." Why should you grumble, then, that God has not elected you to it? . . .

You love this world's pleasures better than religion; then why should you grumble that God has not chosen you to religion? If you love religion, he *has* chosen you to it. If you desire it, he has chosen you to it. If you do not, what right have you to say that God ought to have given you what you do not wish for?²²

The Goal of Election

Paul wrote in verse four that God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” The purpose for God’s election of individuals is that those same individuals would be holy (set apart) and blameless (perfected by the work of Christ on the cross). We see Paul use this same terminology elsewhere:

- Eph 5:27 – “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, . . . so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”
- Col 1:22 – “. . . you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, . . .”
- Jude 24 - Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

The fact that Paul also writes that saints will be presented in this way “before God” all works to teach us that Paul is referring to the absolutely sinless, holy, and blameless

²² Charles Spurgeon, sermon on 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

condition in which we shall be presented to God at the second coming of Christ. This does not exclude experiential sanctification in this life. This temporal occurrence is a prelude to its ultimate consummation in the end.

This also forces us to admit that our holiness and blamelessness is the result of election and not the cause of it. Again, we must repeat that God did not look through time to see our decision for Christ and *then* choose us.

The Location of Election

Non-Calvinists read this passage that so clearly speaks of God's unconditional election of individuals to salvation and typically point to two small words in an attempt to downplay the striking teaching. In verse three, Paul writes that God does all this "in Him" (or "in Christ"). Paul uses the term "in Christ" or "in Him" eight times in this passage (vv. 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13).

Non-Calvinists insist that an individual is chosen for salvation because and only after he puts himself "in Christ" through deciding to accept Christ as Savior by an act of free will.²³ However, the Bible teaches that God foreknows *people*, not *facts about people*.²⁴

Some say that it is not individuals who are elected but Christ is elected. Therefore, since believers are united to Christ because of their decision for Christ, then believers are in Christ (the only true elect one) and therefore elect themselves. In this sense, election is corporate and not individual. God elects a "group" and those who are in the group are part of the elect. However, as we saw earlier, God did not choose a plan but people.

There is no doubt that it is our union with Christ is the basis for our salvation. The question remains, however: how did we come to be "in union" (or "in the group") with Christ? The phrase is ambiguous and says neither that we are elect because we are already in Christ nor that we are elect in order that we shall be in Christ.²⁵

It would seem odd to state that the ground for our being elect is our choice for Christ when Paul goes to such lengths to teach that election is ground completely in the sovereign will of God and His matchless love.

The best explanation of this short phrase is that it is "through Christ" that we are elected and ultimately saved. To state it negatively, we might say that election is "not apart from Christ." When God elected a people from the fallen mass of humanity, He never intended to save them apart from His Son but wholly by means of what the Son would accomplish.

We see the same thing taught in Paul's second letter to Timothy. There, Paul wrote that God "saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us *in Christ Jesus* before the ages began and

²³ Jack Cottrell, "Conditional Election," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975). 61.

²⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 676.

²⁵ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 109.

which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 1:9-10).

Therefore, we can say that Jesus is the means through which God’s electing purpose is put into effect. Indeed, it is God’s purpose to “unite all things in [Christ]” (Eph 1:10).

The Results of Election

We not only find the basis of election but the end results. Paul teaches us that the Father “chose us” so that we will be “holy and blameless.” We also see that God “predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” (1:5). Election ends in perfected sanctification and adoption. God sets us apart unto holiness and gives us the special status of being children of the King.

Some teach that election is only to national privilege or to service. However, it is eminently clear that election results in salvation. Paul says as much in his letter to the Thessalonians, when he wrote “we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13).

In 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, Paul references election four times, and then ties the doctrine of election to humility, “so that no human being might boast” (v.29). God intentionally designed salvation so that no man could boast of it. He didn’t merely arrange it so that boasting would be discouraged or kept to a minimum—He planned it so that boasting would be absolutely excluded. Election does precisely that.²⁶

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

What should be our response to all of this? Peter answers for us in his first epistle:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, **that you may proclaim the excellencies** of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Far from being a doctrine that causes anxiety, pride, elitism, or division, the doctrine of election is seen to elicit praise to a holy God who calls people out of darkness into His marvelous light.

²⁶ Mark Webb, “What Difference Does it Make?” *Reformation and Revival Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 1994, pp.52.

Election in Romans 9

Along with the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the ninth chapter of Romans stands out as a primary text on election. In this section, we will work our way slowly through this often disputed text. There are many different positions taken by interpreters but we will see that in handling the text in a straight-forward manner a single interpretation emerges.

The Context of Romans 9

Romans 8:1-28

We must first remember that Paul did not break his letter to the Romans into smaller and smaller sections (those divisions that we call chapters and verses).²⁷ Paul earlier talks about a certain people for whom it is said, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). Paul continues through chapter eight to write about these specific people who are "in Christ Jesus." We note that he writes of:

- "those who live according to the Spirit" (8:5)
- Those for whom "the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you" (8:11)
- "we all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (8:14)
- These have "received the Spirit of adoption as sons" (8:15)
- The Spirit bears witness with us that "we are children of God (8:16)
- A very real "glory" is "to be revealed to us" (8:18)
- We ourselves "have the firstfruits of the Spirit" (8:23)
- The Spirit "helps us in our weakness" and "intercedes for us with groanings" (8:26)
- The Spirit "intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (8:27)
- God works all things together for God for "those who love God" and "those who are called according to His purpose" (8:28)

Paul is obviously writing about a very specific group of persons. In no way can he be writing about every single person who has ever lived. These are believers in Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, children of God, called by God according to His glorious purpose.

After the descriptive statements above, Paul enters into several verses that have brought much controversy. He moves from talking about "those who love God" and "those who are called" to "those whom He foreknew" (8:29). The full verse says:

²⁷ Stephanus, a French printer from Paris, produced four editions of the biblical manuscript that later became known as the *Textus Receptus* (1546, 1549, 1550, 1551). Stephanus first divided the Bible into numbered verses in 1551 in his fourth edition (which also included two Latin versions (the translations of Jerome and Erasmus) on both sides of his Greek text). These manuscripts, edited from the originals by Erasmus and edited further by Beza and Estienne, became the base for the King James Version of the Bible. However, the document went through multiple editions before being known as the *Textus Receptus* for the first time in 1633 (twenty-two years after the publication of the King James Version of the Bible).

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Obviously, this verse speaks of election, predestination, foreknowledge and much more. In the discussion of election, this verse comes up early and often. This is the primary verse behind the alternate view of election: the conditional view of election. Therefore, before we begin to discuss these two verses, we must first take a look at the doctrine of foreknowledge.

It is the rare believer who will argue against election. The disagreement between Calvinists and non-Calvinists occur over the *basis* of election. The non-Calvinist will say that God elects by looking into the future (because He is outside of time) and seeing who will believe in Christ and who will not. If God sees that a person is going to come to saving faith in Christ, the God will *elect* that person *based on His foreknowledge of that person's faith*. If God sees that a person will not come to saving faith, then God will not elect that person.²⁸

Election and the Foreknowledge of God

In the Bible, we find the word “foreknow” used as a verb and the word “foreknowledge” used as a noun. If you foreknow something, you have foreknowledge of that thing. They are based on the same word but have different uses. The biblical authors are very consistent in how they use those two words, as we will see below.

The Biblical Definition of “Foreknowledge”

First, the word does not simply mean to have cognitive knowledge of something before it happens. The non-Calvinist concept of foreknowledge, appealing though it may be, is not borne out of Scripture. The word means more than simply having advance knowledge or precognition of what is to come.²⁹ God is not passively collecting information. Instead, the verb refers to an active and selective knowledge which regards a person with favor and makes the person foreknown an object of love.

Every time the verb “foreknow” is used and the action of foreknowing is attributed to God (as the subject of the sentence), the object that He foreknows is always (Always!) personal. God foreknows *people*! The Bible never tells us that God merely knows facts about people (such as the fact that they would believe).³⁰ The word has its origin in the

²⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 676. See also Jack Cottrell, “The Classical Arminian View of Election,” in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. By Chad Owen Brand (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2006), 73.

²⁹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 382.

³⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 676.

Hebrew concept of *yada*, which typically means an intimate knowledge – it was even used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.³¹

In other words, God looks into the future and thought of people in saving relationship to Himself and in that sense, He “knew them” long ago.³² Biblical authors use this sense of the world “know” often and the prefix “fore” simply means that God “knew” them in this way prior to their physical existence:

1. “If one loves God, one is known by Him” (1 Cor 8:3).
2. “You have come to know God, or rather to be known by God” (Gal 4:9).
3. “God saw the people of Israel--and God knew” (Ex 2:25).
4. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5).³³
5. “O people of Israel . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2).³⁴
6. “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (Rom 11:2).
7. “I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and they know Me” (John 10:14).
8. “And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matt 7:23).³⁵

The Biblical Use of “Foreknowledge”

Secondly, when we look at specific passages that speak of God’s foreknowledge, we find that God never speaks of our faith or the fact that we would eventually believe in Christ as the reason why God chose us.³⁶ In fact, we will see as we continue in Romans 9 (and elsewhere), that Paul goes to great lengths to ensure that we do not come up with this reason for God’s free election (see Romans 9:11-13).³⁷ The primary problem with a non-Calvinistic interpretation of certain passages that speak of foreknowledge is the propensity to simply read the English word and import a preconceived definition of that word in the verse. There is usually little to know exegesis of the surrounding verses or the passage as a whole. A good example of that is below.

The other main passage used to teach the foreknowledge view does not hold up under scrutiny. In Peter’s first letter, he writes “To those who are elect . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Peter 1:1-2). At first glance, this verse would seem to settle the discussion – *election is according to foreknowledge*.

³¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 393-395, as quoted in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 382.

³² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 676.

³³ This is Jewish parallelism, equating the “knew you” with the “consecrated you.”

³⁴ If the simple foreknowledge view is taken here, God is saying that He was aware cognitively only of Israel from all the other families of the earth.

³⁵ This is obviously speaking of a “knowledge” of someone that goes far beyond mental awareness of existence.

³⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 677.

³⁷ “. . . 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’” (Rom 9:11-13).

However, just a few verses later, Peter uses the exact same term again and gives us a clue to *his* understanding of the word (which is of primary importance). He writes of Christ, and says:

¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰ *He was foreknown before the foundation of the world* but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you (1 Peter 1:18-20).

Does Peter mean that “Before the foundation of world, God *knew that Christ would choose to come to earth*”? This conflicts with many passages that reveal to us how Jesus understood His reason for coming to earth:

- John 6:38 - For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him *who sent me*.
- John 8:42 - I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but *he sent me*.

There can be no doubt that the idea of “previous commitment” is the only possible meaning in Peter’s mind. In this passage, what is the object of foreknowledge? It is not Christ’s faith or any other action or attribute of His but it was Christ Himself who was foreknown. Just as it was the Father’s foreknowledge in 1:2, so here it must be the Father who foreknew Christ. This “foreknowledge” expresses a loving, committed relationship between the members of the Trinity.

In the same way, the Father began a loving, committed relationship with the elect. In 1 Peter 1:2 or 20, “foreknew” cannot mean simply “knew about ahead of time.” That interpretation would empty the passage of its meaning. It has to mean, “chosen” or “selected” ahead of time.

In Romans 11:2, we read that “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.” To apply the simple foreknowledge view here, the verse would read, “God has not rejected his people *whom He knew in advance would choose Him*.” This is clearly not the case. God chose Israel, the smallest and weakest of all the nations, for His own reasons. Deuteronomy tells us this:

“The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you . . .” (Deut 7:6-8).

The non-Calvinist must also struggle with the fact that immediately after Paul’s words in 11:2, he goes on to note Israel’s continued unfaithfulness.

To put it simply, the biblical idea of foreknowledge carries with it the idea of favorable disposition or selection as well as advance knowledge.³⁸

The Rationale for this View of Foreknowledge

Third, individuals who base election on God's foreknowledge usually do so in a noble attempt to protect the honor of God and the free will of man in salvation. The attempt to protect God's honor is based on a misunderstanding of the Calvinistic position. This view is quite satisfying to many who still hold strongly to the caricature that election is arbitrary and that it also makes all men puppets and God the great puppeteer. However, the veracity of a doctrine is not to be determined by its palatability.

However, this position does not provide that solace. If God can look into the future and see that Bob Black will come to faith in Christ and that Sue White will not, then those facts are fixed or determined. If we assume that God's knowledge of the future is true and perfect and exhaustive, then it is absolutely true (even in eternity past) that Bob Black will be saved and Sue White will not be saved.

Also, in this same vein of thinking, it is often argued that unconditional election destroys the doctrine of the love of God. It is asked, "Is it right to say that a loving God actively only elects some to salvation and the rest He does not choose go to hell?" The same question must be asked of the adherent to conditional election: "Why does God create or allow to be born the individual that He knows will never trust Christ as Savior?"

The Problem with this View of Foreknowledge

To maintain the foreknowledge view, it must be argued that even though their eternities are determined, they are determined by something other than God. What then? Is there some force other than God who determines such things? Of course not. If we say that the eternal destinies of men and women are determined by those same men and women, then we turn election on its head. The act of predestinating something that one knows is going to happen anyway is a meaningless exercise. It is like either predicting or commanding a man who has jumped into the air to come down. He will come down but not because you predicted it or commanded it. Your words will have nothing to do with the actual event. The concept of election loses all integrity of meaning with this simple foreknowledge view. God does nothing more than "ratify" the decision already made by finite mortal fallen man. Charles Spurgeon wrote that this view "marries Christ to a bride He did not choose."³⁹

In other words, the difference in the two views of election can be clearly seen in how proponents of both positions answer this simple question: "What is the deciding difference between a believer and a non-believer?" The one who holds to unconditional election will say that the difference lies in God and His freedom to elect. The one who holds to conditional election must say that the difference lies in the choice of the

³⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 383.

³⁹ Charles Spurgeon, quoted by Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, 63.

individual. The issue really comes down to “What is the ultimate cause of salvation and the believer’s choice to trust Jesus as Savior?”⁴⁰ The final determinant is the choice of man – that is the difference between men in heaven and men in hell.⁴¹

Finally, we can say that the major problem with the foreknowledge view is that it forces man to do the impossible: choose God while still in his fallen state. If election depends on God foreseeing our faith, we should first change the word to “post-destination” since God is responding to something we have done. More importantly, if election depends on God foreseeing our faith, we have to admit that none would be saved because God would never see *any faith at all in anyone*. As we learned in our discussion of the doctrine of total depravity, Paul has unequivocally stated that fallen man does not seek God and will never choose God on his own.

Now, with this in mind, let’s continue our look at the context of Romans 9 by investigating the immediate context – Romans 8:29-39.

The Immediate Context of Romans 9

Romans 8:29-30

In Romans 8:29-30, we find God at work and very active. For every verb mentioned in the list – foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified – God is the active agent. God is the one doing the work. The audience likewise does not change. For those of whom He foreknew He also did all the other things that result in final glorification. The passage is presented here again for your convenience:

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The teaching that God’s predestination is determined by His foreknowledge is simply *not* taught in the passage. The Bible does not say, “Whom God foreknew would believe, He predestined.” Paul does not say that God chooses people on account of His prior knowledge.⁴² In fact, *the only thing* the text declares is that God predestines those whom He foreknows. This passage teaches less than the advocates of foreknowledge desire and yet we will see that it teaches much more than they want it to teach.⁴³ As we saw earlier,

⁴⁰ Ken Keathley, “The Doctrine of Salvation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2007), 707.

⁴¹ We will discuss this in great detail in the later chapter of “Irresistible Grace.”

⁴² R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God: Know God’s Perfect Plan for His Glory and His Children* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 130

⁴³ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 130.

foreknowledge here is not some specific propositional knowledge *about* people, but it refers to God's relational knowledge of certain people themselves.⁴⁴

No one on either side of orthodoxy denies that God has foreknowledge! After all, how could God predestine someone He didn't have in mind? As we will see in the ninth chapter, God had to have known Jacob to have chosen Jacob.

As it turns out, the only support this passage gives the simple foreknowledge view is the *order* of events. However, the same two ideas are presented in reverse order in Acts 2:23, where Peter says, “. . . this Jesus, delivered up according to the *definite plan* and *foreknowledge* of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”⁴⁵

Actually, Paul's use of the terms argues against the foreknowledge view. Paul progresses from foreknowledge and predestination to calling, justification, and glorification. Therein lies the problem for the foreknowledge view.

A crucial question to ask is, “What is the relationship between these activities? Specifically, what is the relationship between ‘calling’ and the remaining acts of God?” What does it mean for God to “call” someone? If we take “call” to be a gospel invitation that everyone can hear and respond to, then we must be consistent and teach that those whom He calls are justified. This cannot be the case because many reject the call of the gospel from those who witness to them.

Instead, we must make a theological distinction between the outward call of the gospel and the inward call of the gospel. This “inward call” is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a man or woman.

We say all this because of the proper inference that when you read the passage, you must mentally insert the word “ALL” before each major word. The word “all” is not there but it can (and must) be inserted into the reading for the passage to make sense. The passage practically reads:

- 29 For *ALL* those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
30 And *ALL* those he predestined, he also called; *ALL* those he called, he also justified; *ALL* those he justified, he also glorified.

The only way around this is to force a certain theological interpretation into verse 29: “[all] those God foreknew [would choose Christ] He also predestined.” It is necessary to insert “all.” It is wrong to insert “would choose Christ.”

⁴⁴ Bruce Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation” in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. By Chad Owen Brand (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2006), 26.

⁴⁵ The NASB has “predetermined plan and foreknowledge.” The NIV has “God's set purpose and foreknowledge.” The NKJV has “determined purpose and foreknowledge.”

To read the two verses any other way does serious damage to the meaning of the text. To insert “some” or “most” or even “all but one” in place of “all” is to do great damage theologically. This would leave you proclaiming that *some* whom God foreknew He predestined, *some* whom He predestined He called, *some* whom He called He justified, and *some* he justified He glorified. I trust you see the problem with that.

Here is the problem because of the above explanation: If you insist on defining foreknowledge as a passive look into the future to determine knowledge of a decision made, you must insert “some” into the chain. We know, though, that there is no good reason to import that type of theological baggage into this passage. It is irresponsible to do so.

Some might be tempted to say that an inward call is the correct way to view this verb but God only calls inwardly those whom He knows will respond. In other words, God does not “waste” the inward call but only gives it to those He knows will respond favorably.

In answer to that assertion, we must ask, “What purpose does this call serve and how powerful is this inward call from the Holy Spirit?” Is there any advantage or difference to be made in receiving this inward call? If it is only given to those whom God knows will respond to it, then it would seem to be in inward call with no *real* influence.⁴⁶ However, if it does have some sort of determining influence, then God is predestining an advantage to some that He is not predestining to another. A non-Calvinist would reject this idea of an unfair advantage. Finally, if the call does not influence, then what does it do?

Therefore, we must say that God predestines us based on His gracious commitment to us before the world was created.⁴⁷ God chose to set His love upon people. To those for whom He did this (foreknowledge), He predestined, called, justified and glorified.

Romans 8:31-39

Immediately after stating the glorious truth in Romans 8:29-30, Paul asks “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (8:31). Notice the terms used here – “us” and “we.” Paul will use this same pronoun repeatedly in this section (note also the interplay between “us” and “God’s elect”).

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- “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (8:32).
- “How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (8:32).
- “Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies” (8:33).
- “Christ Jesus is the one . . . who was raised . . . interceding for us” (8:34).
- “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (8:35).
- “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:37).

⁴⁶ Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 136.

⁴⁷ S.M Baugh, “The Meaning of Foreknowledge,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 194.

- “For I am sure that [nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39).

Who is the “us” in these verses? Obviously, Paul is inserting himself into the arguments he makes. We can plainly see that Paul is referring to born-again believers in Jesus Christ – the same ones who will face “no condemnation” because they are “in Christ Jesus” (8:1). This great love that did not spare Christ and graciously gives all things and intercedes and keeps from separation is a very real *redemptive* love. It is a *saving* love.

We have now established the context leading into Romans 9. Paul is speaking of the glory of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Romans 9 is typically seen as a very difficult and controversial passage. However, virtually all misunderstandings of Romans 9 stream from a failure to see that the verses that will follow were written to solve a problem brought about by Paul’s soaring words of security in the previous chapter. Paul envisions someone asking,

Paul, this is great but I have a problem. You say that the elect are secure in Christ. What about Israel? Aren’t they the elect? Weren’t they promised security as well? Of course they were. Don’t you realize that the vast majority of your own people reject your message of salvation by grace. If their election is the same as my election, how can you say that I can be confident in my security. If God can’t keep His promises to them, how can I be confident that He will keep His promises to me?

Let’s please keep this objection in mind as we begin to discuss this important chapter.

Romans 9:1-5 – Has God’s Word Failed?

To answer the anticipated objection voiced above, Paul writes:

¹ I am speaking the truth in Christ--I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit-- ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

In verses 4-5, Paul rehearses the great benefits that have been given to the Jewish people: adoption, glory, covenants, the law, worship, promises, patriarchs, and the Christ (the long-awaited Messiah) from within their own race. With all these “advantages,” why do so many Jews not believe Paul’s message? Israel is God’s chosen, covenant people, and yet many of them are accursed and cut off from Christ and salvation. Why has this happened? Has God’s covenantal promises to Israel failed? Has the rejection of Christ by so many Jews managed to thwart God’s eternal purposes? If God cannot or does not keep

His promises with Israel, how can we be sure He will keep His promises with us? If we cannot trust in God in this, how can we trust Him with other promises, such as the security found in 8:33 (“Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.”)

Before we move on to Paul’s answer, it must be stated here than any explanation of this chapter that fails to deal honestly and consistently with these questions anticipated by Paul is not a good explanation. Many will say that Romans 9 is about “election to service.”⁴⁸ Most objectors will say that Romans 9 deals not with individuals but with nations and national privileges.

However, if Paul is only talking about temporary, earthly blessings or historical privilege in service, what led him to do so after talking of salvation in chapter eight and picking up the topic of salvation once again in chapters ten and eleven? If only national privilege, then why does the author fill the rest of this chapter with the kind of language he characteristically employs everywhere else to speak of salvation and damnation? Note the terms used: *accursed, election, works, unrighteousness, mercy, compassion, wrath, destruction, saved, righteousness, by faith, by the works of the law, whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame* and many more similar phrases. All of these sound like they belong in a conversation about salvation.⁴⁹

When you hear someone teach about nations or national privilege, please ask yourself throughout the presentation, “What is the relationship between the parts of this passage said to be limited to nations to this initial question with Paul’s initial answer in verse 6-13?” If you are in a presentation where you are able to ask questions, ask the teacher how the interpretation given answers the question Paul is trying to answer.

The many defenses against the Calvinistic interpretation of this passage will go to great lengths to take Paul’s words in Romans 9 as far from personal salvation as possible. In doing so, a great and obvious inconsistency is revealed.

Romans 9:6a – Not all Israel is Israel

Paul begins his defense of divine election unto salvation thusly: “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6).

Paul responds quickly by saying, “Yes, it is true God chose Israel. Yes, it is true that God made a covenant with Israel. Yes, it is true that many in Israel are accursed and cut off from God. But no, it is not true that God’s Word has failed.” All that follows in the next several verses are used for the express purpose of proving this assertion of Paul’s. We *must* keep that in mind as we make our way through the passage.

⁴⁸ Cottrell says, “This election . . . is not an election to salvation at all but an election to service” in Cottrell, “The Classic Arminian View of Election,” 124.

⁴⁹ Greg Welty

In other words, Paul instructs his objectors that they have misunderstood God's intentions as revealed in Scripture. Paul's vocabulary reveals this in verses 6 and 11. Look at the following interaction:⁵⁰

9:6 – “God's word has not failed (fallen)”
is the opposite of

9:11 – “in order that God's purpose of election might continue (stand)”

Note carefully why Paul is able to declare that God's word has not failed and why God's purpose will succeed: “Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (9:6). A literal translation of this verse reads, “all who are of Israel, these are not Israel.”⁵¹

If God's word is “all ethnic or natural-born Jews are to be saved,” then clearly God's word and purpose *has* failed. However, Paul denies that God ever intended to save all of Abraham's physical descendents. Instead, God's purpose will be shown to be a plan to save a remnant of Israel, not the entirety of the race.

Paul's point here is that the rampant unbelief among ethnic Israel does not invalidate God's promises. Paul is going to argue that these specific promises were not made to ethnic Israel; they were made to spiritually elect Israel. To put it as simply as possible: *not every person who is a physically ethnic Israelite is a spiritually elect Israelite*. There is an Israel within Israel. There is a true Israel.⁵²

Also, it must be noted again that the only way to understand this verse is to think of individuals, not nations. Paul is most assuredly not saying, “They are not all nations of Israel who are descended from the one nation of Israel.”⁵³ That does not even make sense. Instead, Paul is addressing individual Jews who can trace their family lineage back to Abraham, the father of the Jews through his sons Isaac and Jacob.

Romans 9:6b-8 – True Israel

In order to prove his point, Paul next appeals to the national history of Israel – the families of Abraham and Isaac.

⁶ . . . For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

⁵⁰ John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 33.

⁵¹ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 116.

⁵² Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 117.

⁵³ James White, “Romans 9 Transcript” on <http://aomin.org/index.php?itemid=2167>, accessed January 8, 2008.

In verse 7, Paul writes that “not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.” He explains what he means by this when he brings Isaac into the equation. Abraham had two sons: Isaac and Ishmael. These two then had sons of their own. However, Paul tells us here that it is only “through Isaac shall [Abraham’s] offspring be named” (9:7b). To be related to Abraham physically does not guarantee that you will be a child of God. The Pharisees believed this to be the case, as seen in their interaction with Jesus in John 8:37-40:

³⁷ “I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” ³⁹ They answered him, “Araham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.”

Finally, Paul tries to explain his point as clearly as possible in verse 8: “This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.” God could have done it differently but He is free to do as He wants. The promises and privileges Paul mentioned in the first five verses are for the “children of the promise” but not “children of the flesh.” The “children of the flesh” are physical descendants whom God *has not* chosen and “children of the promise” are physical descendants whom God *has* chosen to be beneficiaries of the covenant.

Romans 9:9-13 – The Promise

What does it mean when Paul talks about “the promise”? Again, he anticipates the question and answer plainly:

⁹ For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ 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-- ¹² she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

In the verses above (6-13), Paul points to the three patriarchs of the Jewish faith – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – as examples of God’s election. They became what they were by God’s choice (election).

The Election of Abraham

Paul has been talking about Abraham since verse 7. However, election is obvious in the case of Abraham so Paul does not spend much time on the issue.⁵⁴ Abraham had a pagan

⁵⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Doctrines of Grace: Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 95.

ancestry and was living a pagan life in the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia. He had no knowledge of the true God except what he could see in the natural world around him. Yet, he was an idol-worshipper (Josh 24:2). There was no reason for Abraham to be chosen by God to become the father of all the Jews but God chose him anyway. This is election, pure and simple.

The Election of Isaac

Some might argue about Abraham's election and say, "That's beside the point. God had to start somewhere."⁵⁵ No one denies God's election of Israel through the election of one man, Abraham. This is conceded. However, the bigger issue at stake here is whether or not all the descendents of Abraham are saved by reason of their having come from him or whether the principle of God's choice also applies after the initial choice of Abraham.

Paul mentions a promise in verse 4 and 8. He finally explains in verse nine that the promise is the one given to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. We find this account in Genesis 18:

¹⁰ The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. . . . ¹⁴ "Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son."

Paul continues to explain this concept of "promise" by dealing with the two boys born to Abraham and Sarah. We know from Genesis and Paul's teachings elsewhere who this promised child is. Paul writes in Galatians 4:

²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. . . . ²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

From these two accounts, we learn that Abraham had two sons. Ishmael was born of Hagar, a slave woman. Thirteen years later, Isaac was born of Rebekah, the wife of Abraham. Ishmael was the oldest and was fully Abraham's son. By all accounts, he should have been chosen but he was not. He was a physical descendent but he was not a child of promise.

We read an interesting account in Genesis that gives us a peek into God's intentions towards these two boys. Abraham prays for his first son, Ishmael, and says, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" (Gen 17:18). God answered Abraham's prayer by saying, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him" (Gen 17:19-20). Basically, God said "I will make a promise and my promises are

⁵⁵ Boice, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 96.

not predictions of what will happen with your help. My promises are declarations of what I intend to bring about by my sovereign power.”⁵⁶

The Bible tells us in verse eight that Ishmael was “natural” or “of the flesh” and Isaac was supernatural or a child “of the promise.” This contrast is intentional. The difference between the two is in the supernatural intervention of God in the case of Isaac. Ishmael was born of Abraham’s natural sexual prowess. But Isaac was conceived when both Abraham *and* Sarah were well past the age of childbearing.

In the same way, we are born decisively because of God’s powerful promise and not by any human resources. The apostle John says the same thing in the first chapter of his gospel, writing, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, *not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*” (John 1:12-13).

The Election of Jacob

Paul, so proficient in his defense, again anticipates an objection sure to be raised. Paul’s listeners could easily argue, “Ishmael was not a full-blooded Jew as a child of Abraham and the Egyptian slave woman Hagar. Therefore, it would seem that God *had* to choose Isaac and not Ishmael.”

That is all true. In order to answer this objection, Paul proceeds to the next generation: Isaac and Rebekah’s twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Paul’s use of the words “and not only so” reveal that he is continuing his argument. I will repeat the words here:

¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ 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-- ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Paul strives to make the point that there was a single man involved in the birth of Rebekah’s sons: their father, Isaac. Paul defeats the argument regarding Isaac and Ishmael by noting that both boys had the same father and same mother. This means the argument against Ishmael’s lineage fails.

In the next few verses, we see the following points made by Paul to establish his teaching that election of Jacob over Esau in particular and election unto salvation in general is unconditional:

1. The choice was made before the twins were born. Indeed, we know from Ephesians that election occurred before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).

⁵⁶ John Piper, “God’s Word Stands: Not All Israel is Israel, Part 1” at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/10/114_Gods_Word_Stands_Not_All_Israel_is_Israel_Part_1/, accessed January 9, 2008.

2. The choice was made before either of the twins had done anything. Paul notes that the twins did not have a chance to do anything good (to warrant the choice) or anything bad (to disallow the choice).
3. The choice was made so that God's purpose in election might stand or continue. According to Paul, God ordained these events in history so that this choice would specifically be usable as in illustration for the doctrine of election.
4. The choice was not made because of works. This essentially repeats the earlier words of verse 11.
5. The choice was made because of him who calls [God].
6. The choice was not made according to normal birth order. The boys were twins but Esau was the oldest by virtue of his leaving the womb first. In spite of this and going against centuries of Jewish tradition, Jacob was chosen. There is nothing to explain this act except God's right to do as He pleases.

Paul is belaboring the point. He repeats himself and almost stutters to make sure we understand the contrast between what God does and what men do. The argument is now complete and it is settled in the mind of Paul. However, once again, he knows that his teaching will raise objections in the mind of his hearers and readers. He turns his attention to their objections. Before we do the same, we need to address a common interpretation of these few verses and see if they fit in the context of Paul's argument.

Jacob and Esau: Nations or Individuals?

Many will provide an interpretation of these five verses about Jacob and Esau that allow for a different conclusion. There are basically two interpretations of these verses:

1. These are not examples of individual men elected to eternal life but of the nation Israel collectively and corporately.⁵⁷
2. Even if these are examples of individuals, it is not for salvation but to honor and historical prominence and privilege.⁵⁸

According to this popular interpretation,⁵⁹ Paul used these Old Testament individuals in their position as "fathers of nations." The support for the "nations" view is based on the fact that two of the Old Testament passages which Paul cites (Gen 25:23; Mal 1:1-5) refer to Jacob and Esau as figurative heads of national entities and their historical destinies.⁶⁰ Norman Geisler writes:

⁵⁷ William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 166, 173-175. See also Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 356.

⁵⁸ Morris, *Romans*, 356. See also C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979), 479. See also Craig L. Blomberg, "Elijah, Election, and the Use of Malachi in the Old Testament," *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1987): 109-116. Blomberg does see predestination to salvation in vv. 21-23 but not in vv. 1-20.

⁵⁹ Jack Cottrell puts forth both arguments in his chapter in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*. See page 76 and 124.

⁶⁰ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 120.

Few scriptural texts are more misused by extreme Calvinists than this one. First of all, God is not speaking about the *individual* Jacob, but about the nation of Jacob (Israel). In Genesis when the prediction was made (25:23 NKJV), Rebekah was told ‘Two *nations* are in your womb, two *peoples* shall be separated from your body. . . . And the older shall serve the younger.’ So the reference here is not to *individual* election but to *corporate* election of a nation – the chosen nation of Israel. . . .

God’s “love” for Jacob and “hate” for Esau is not speaking of those men before they were born, but long after the lived. The citation in Romans 9:13 is not from Genesis when they were alive (c. 2000 B.C.) but from Malachi 1:2-3 (c. 400 B.C.), long after they died! The evil deeds done by the Edomites to the Israelites are well documented in the Old Testament (e.g. Num. 20). And it is for these that God is said to have hated them as a country.⁶¹

No one disagrees with the content of the Old Testament passages. Moses and Malachi are obviously making the statement that Jacob and Esau are the fathers of Israel and Edom. Furthermore, it is also obvious that these two Old Testament passages do not teach individual salvation. However, the assertion that Romans 9 speaks solely of nations and not of individuals cannot be substantiated.⁶²

Those who hold to corporate election cannot successfully explain the thread of Paul’s argument as it begins in 9:1-5 and continues through the rest of the chapter.⁶³ Remember, Paul is trying to answer the charge that many within elect Israel are “accursed and cut off from God.” How does an appeal to the collective, corporate election of Israel (Jacob) to earthly, historical prominence solve the problem of the unbelieving, eternally lost Jew? Indeed, it was the fact that ethnic Israel as a whole was God’s chosen covenant people that created the problem Paul seeks to solve in this chapter.⁶⁴

Let’s think about this: If all individual Israelites are God’s covenant people, why are so many individual Israelites accursed and separated from Christ? For Paul to simply reaffirm that God has elected the nation of Israel collectively and destined it for historical prominence is not answer. It is the very basis for the problem Paul is trying to solve. Whatever it is that Paul means by referring to Jacob and Esau, *he intends for the example to solve the problem he is attempting to answer.*

Furthermore, the context of Malachi 1:2-3 is important. Here is the text:

² “I have loved you,” says the LORD. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob's brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved

⁶¹ Geisler, *Chosen but Free*, 82.

⁶² White, *The Potter’s Freedom*, 217.

⁶³ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 58. One cannot begin to discuss this passage without digesting all that Piper has written in his exhaustive study.

⁶⁴ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 121.

Jacob³ but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.”⁴ If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,” the LORD of hosts says, “They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called ‘the wicked country,’ and ‘the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.’”

The prophet’s logic is similar to Paul’s and the two make similar arguments. The Jews ask about God’s love for them. God’s love for Jacob (Israel) is not grounded in Jacob’s or Israel’s superiority over Esau (Edom). God asks, “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” The implication of this question is that there was no basis in human distinctives for God to love Jacob or hate Esau. God basically answered, “Didn’t Esau have as much right to be chosen as you? Wasn’t he the son of Isaac? Wasn’t he a twin in the same womb with you? Wasn’t he even the elder brother? Nevertheless, I CHOSE JACOB!” The whole point of God’s answer-the-question-with-a-question is exactly Paul’s point. God’s choice was made solely on the basis of God’s free gracious choice.⁶⁵

Paul saw this in Genesis. Paul saw this in Malachi. To be sure, God’s freedom in election is not the *primary* purpose of the Old Testament texts. However, God’s freedom in election is Paul’s intention with his *use* of those same texts. Paul is establishing a *principle* by which he could explain how individual Israelites were accursed and yet the Word of God had not fallen. Since the unconditional election of some Israelites from within all of physical Israel cannot be seen as an election to “theocratic privilege” (after all, all of Israel *does* have that), we must conclude that Paul views the “purpose of God according to election” (9:11) as a purpose to be free from human influence not only in historical roles or national blessing but also in the determination of who within Israel is saved and who is not.⁶⁶

It is not that Paul is moved to unthinkable grief because Israel is forfeiting its position of service as a nation. It simply cannot be that Paul is speaking of nations when he states that “not all those from Israel are Israel.” The *principle* established in these opening verses is that God’s promised blessings are never enjoyed on the basis of what a person is by birth or works but only on the basis of God’s sovereign choice.⁶⁷ In other words, Paul is establishing a case for a consistent *modus operandi* of God throughout all history.

Paul establishes from these texts that God chooses the recipients of His promised blessing apart from all human distinctives. But it is an unwarranted leap to infer against the very context of Romans 9 that this principle applies only when the promise at stake is “national privilege” or “service” but does not apply to personal, eternal, individual salvation.⁶⁸ So, the issue is not that Paul reads the Old Testament and sees the election of Isaac as the election of an individual or the election of a nation. Instead, the issue is that Paul reads those texts and, divinely inspired to do so, finds the *principle* of unconditional election and immediately applies that principle to the present concern (that is, “Who is

⁶⁵ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 63.

⁶⁶ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 66.

⁶⁷ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 54.

⁶⁸ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 64.

true, spiritual Israel?”).⁶⁹ If our application makes the apostle’s application senseless and useless, then we are not handling the text adequately. Douglas Moo writes clearly:

In a context in which Paul begins speaking rather clearly about the individuals rather than the nations, we should not be surprised that he would apply a text that spoke to the nations to the individuals who founded and, in a sense “embodied” them. It is not the issue of how God uses different individuals or nations in accomplishing his purposes that is Paul’s concern, but *which* individuals, and on *what basis*, belong to God’s covenant people. . . . [Thus] Paul appeals to OT history to establish a principle about the way in which God brings into being his own people.⁷⁰

Thomas Schreiner has listed several reasons why Paul is talking about individual election, not national election, in this passage:⁷¹

1. The phrases “children of God” and “children of the promise” always refer in Paul to those who are the saved of God (see especially Rom 8:16; Gal 4:28; Phil 2:1).
2. Paul says that God’s election is “not because of works but because of His call” (9:11). In any other writings by Paul, the use of “works” is used in the context of salvation (Rom 3:20; 4:2; 9:32; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:9). Since Paul typically claims that salvation is not by works, the burden of proof falls on those who claim he is using this same term in a non-salvific way in Rom 9:11-12.
3. There are certain parallels between Romans 9:11-12 and 2 Timothy 1:9. Both speak of God’s “call”; both stress that the call is not based on “works”; both refer to God’s saving “purpose”; and both say that salvation is decided before human history began. No one denies that eternal salvation is Paul’s point in 2 Timothy. Why the doubt in Romans 9?
4. The further context of Romans 9:22-23 suggests Paul is speaking of salvation. Paul will refer to “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” with “vessels of mercy” that were “prepared beforehand for glory.” These terms are frequently used by Paul to refer to eternal condemnation and eternal salvation (Rom 2:10; 8:18; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 2:3; 1 Tim 6:9; 2 Tim 2:10).
5. The wider context of Romans 10-11 supports the view that Romans 9 is about eternal salvation. The point of Romans 10-11 is the *salvation* of Israel. Read some of the phrases in chapter 10:
 - 10:1 – Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for [Israel] is that they may be saved.
 - 10:3 - For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.
 - 10:9 - If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

⁶⁹ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 68.

⁷⁰ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 586.

⁷¹ Thomas Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation? Some Exegetical and Theological Reflections,” in *Still Sovereign*, 89-106. This article originally appeared in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36/1 (March 1993): 25-40.

- 10:13 - For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
 - 10:14-16 - How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel.
6. Is it to be suggested that Paul discusses national privilege in Romans 9 and eternal salvation in Romans 10-11, even though Romans 9-11 is a contiguous unit of thought?⁷²

So, we see that Paul’s use of these Old Testament passages is to establish a principle. That principle is this: *When God determines who shall and who shall not enjoy His blessing, be they earthly or heavenly, temporal or eternal, He does so according to His sovereign good pleasure and not according to anything in man.*

Romans 9:14-18 – The First Objection

Paul knows what he is teaching. He knows that many will not like his teachings. He knows that people will have objections and he decides to answer these objections by raising them beforehand. Sadly, these same objections continue to be raised two thousand years later.

Before we look at these two objections, it must be asked: *If you hear the teaching of unconditional election and then raise the same objections that the apostle imagined people would raise to what he is teaching in Romans 9, then that means you are objecting to the very teaching of the apostle!* If you make these objections, it should be obvious that you are on the wrong side of the discussion. It is this simple logic that gives me confidence that my interpretation of Paul’s teaching is correct. People ask the same questions to me when I teach this passage. You may be thinking the same questions as you read this chapter. This is telling.

Now, the first objection is as follows:

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!

¹⁵ For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

⁷² Again, the reader is challenged to listen carefully to any exposition of Romans 9-11. Any preaching or teaching that speaks in some parts of the passage about salvation of individuals and about the election of a nation to prominence is mishandling the text and allowing preconceived theological biases to guide his exegesis and interpretation.

The first objection is a simple one. Paul envisions people saying, “Now hold on one minute, Paul. Do you hear what you are saying? If God can freely choose who He is going to save by grace and not take our free will choices into account, then that is not fair! That would make God unfair and unjust!”

How does Paul respond to this? If Paul was teaching election based on God’s foreknowledge of people’s future free will decisions for Christ, then he could have said, “I am glad you made that observation because it indicates you mistook my meaning. I did not mean to imply that God is the one making all the choices. You are right to say that would not be right. He does not choose without taking our free will decisions into account. After all, remember what I just wrote a few sentences ago about God’s foreknowledge of your free will decisions being the very basis for His election. *Besides, this is about nations, anyway!*”⁷³ This is what we would want Paul to say but he does not give us this satisfaction.

Instead, Paul says, “May it never be.” Paul is quick to give an answer to this objection but his answer does not satisfy all. Paul simply quotes the words of the Lord to Moses in the Old Testament incident at Sinai. Paul cites two proofs (note the “for” in 9:15 and 9:17 with the companion “so then” in 9:16 and 9:18). How does this answer to the objection quiet the objector and prove unconditional election? The answer is two-fold:⁷⁴

1. Paul uses an item of grammar. God says, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and compassion on whom I have compassion.” That is the best translation we can come up with in English but it is far from the impact in Paul’s day. God is not saying, “I will have an attitude of mercy towards someone.” The words are not passive but active. Literally, the verse say, “I *will mercy* whom I mercy and I *will compassion* whom I compassion.”⁷⁵ The English language does not have a verb for “mercying” or “compassioning” but the Greek language does. Paul is trying to say that these are things that God *does*, not merely virtues that He has. It is the same as when we say, “I am going to do what I am going to do.” Now, if God is “forced” for any reason to dispense mercy, then it is not true mercy or compassion.
2. The passage Paul quotes (Ex 33:19b) is in explanation of the essence of God’s name and glory. God’s glory and His name consist in His propensity to show mercy and His freedom to distribute that mercy as He wills. Exodus 33:19 is not merely a description of the way God treated Moses (or even how He treats Israel). Instead, God gives to Moses a solemn declaration of His very nature.

⁷³ Peterson, *Election and Free Will*, 117-118.

⁷⁴ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 126-127.

⁷⁵ See Ex 16:23 “Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil.” This is a Hebrew idiomatic form called *idem per idem*, used to preserve the freedom of the subject to perform the action in whatever way he pleases. The way the action is executed is determined by the will of the subject (see Piper, *The Justification of God*, 62).

The surrounding context of Exodus 33 provides nothing in Moses for the reason why God decided to reveal His glory that day. God says, “You have found favor in my sight” and “I have known you by name.” God does not say “I have found you to be favorable” or “you have made your name known.”⁷⁶

So, what is the apostolic interpretation of this passage from Exodus 33? Paul writes “it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” Literally, the passage could read “It is not of the one willing, neither of the one running, but of the mercying God.” The word “willing” refers to “one’s inner desire, purpose, or readiness to do something” and the word “running” refers to “the actual execution of that desire.”⁷⁷ Paul refers here to human actions and then denies that election is based on either action.⁷⁸ Rather than backing off the idea of God’s strong sovereignty in salvation, Paul highlights it.⁷⁹

Paul then turns to his second proof or illustration: the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.⁸⁰ Paul says that God had a purpose (not Pharaoh’s purpose, but God’s) for Pharaoh’s rise to power. God’s purpose in hardening Pharaoh’s heart was in order that He might multiply His signs in the land of Egypt (see Ex 7:3-5) and “get glory over Pharaoh” (Ex 14:3-4). Indeed, God said, “But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (Ex 9:16). God was going to reveal His power and glorify His name in the heathen nation of Egypt by proving His superiority over the Egyptian gods. Time was needed to execute all the judgments against Egypt’s gods. Had Pharaoh buckled after the first few plagues, God’s plan would have been ruined (it seems silly to even talk like that, doesn’t it?). To put it crudely, God *used* Pharaoh.

Are our priorities equal to God’s? Are we concerned that His power and name be proclaimed throughout the earth? Usually, our first inclination is to protect and proclaim the extraordinary free will of man. Yet, there is nothing in this passage about that, contrary to the assertions of some.⁸¹

Finally, Paul repeats part of his earlier point while adding a new wrinkle in verse eighteen. Paul says that God “has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens

⁷⁶ Welty, “Election and Calling.”

⁷⁷ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 593.

⁷⁸ By the way, can you insert “nations” into this answer. Is it the “nation who wills” or the “nation who runs”?

⁷⁹ Peterson, *Election and Free Will*, 118.

⁸⁰ We have already discussed the oft-argued position that Pharaoh hardened his own heart before God began to harden it. See page 37-40 of this document.

⁸¹ Concerning Paul’s words in Romans 9:16, Geisler writes that “it is a free act of our will in receiving it (John 1:12; Eph 2:8)” (see Geisler, *Chosen but Free*, 59). He bases his assertion on Paul’s use of the Greek word *ek*, which means “out of.” However, the Greek term *ek* does not appear in Romans 9:16. Furthermore, Geisler has already stated that Romans 9 is not about salvation yet here he writes about Paul’s discussion of eternal salvation. How did a discussion about nations just a few verses earlier now become a discussion about individual salvation? Finally, why would Paul imagine that anyone would object to such an interpretation that is so “friendly” to man’s pride?

whomever he wills” (Rom 9:18). It says exactly that – God will harden whoever He desires to harden. The choice rests in God. We may not like that but the Bible declares it.

Paul’s point in citing both Exodus 33:19 and 9:16 is to prove that there is no unrighteousness in God. How does he do this? If we would but acknowledge that no one *deserves* mercy, perhaps we would cease *demanding* mercy.⁸² To object to God’s judgment is to presume upon His grace. The only way we can deem God’s free choice to bestow mercy to be an act of unrighteousness is to forget that the only thing any human being deserves is eternal death. As is often stated, the incredible thing about the statement, “Jacob I loved, Esau I hated” is not the part about the hatred of Esau. That should shock no one. Instead, the incredible statement that is should be hard to believe is that God set His love on Jacob!

Paul knows that his teaching will raise objections. Ironically, those who preach libertarian free will and that man’s choice is the basis for God’s choice do not hear these same objections. That should tell us something. However, there is one more objection that Paul anticipates (and again, continues to be raised today).

Romans 9:19-24 – The Second Objection

Paul knows that some will still not accept his difficult teaching. He anticipates yet another objection and tells us again what many still say today:

¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory --²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

The question is one of logic and it is a reasonable thought (at first glance). However, it does not seem to be a humble inquiry from a disciple searching for truth. It seems more of an indignant complaint or protest.⁸³ If God is sovereign and if God is the one who mercies whom He will and even *hardens* whom He will (as Paul has just asserted in 9:18), then that means that people are saved because of God’s free decision. Furthermore, that means that God has no grounds to punish anyone because everyone is acting according to God’s will, not their own. If his is true, then God is unjust and unfair.

We might expect Paul to give a long, detailed response to this question but notice Paul’s short response. The first words he writes in his original composition is “Oh man.” He is putting the objector in his rightful place, separated by an immense distance from God

⁸² Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 128.

⁸³ Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 137.

(ontologically speaking).⁸⁴ If we appreciate the chasm between God and man, the answer Paul gives is clear. The doctrine of election offends people because people want God to be like them. In many people's minds, God is merely a bigger version of us.⁸⁵

Paul makes it clear as he continues: "Who are you to answer back to God? Can't the potter do as he wishes with the clay in his possession?" The analogy must be pressed: Who makes the decisions in the potter/clay relationship? The answer is obvious and therein lies the problem. Most of us do not want to be the clay. At the very least, we want to "assist" the potter in his task.⁸⁶

Paul asks, "Will the thing molded (that's you and me) ask the potter (that's God), "Why did you make me this way?" The question is asked to reveal how ludicrous the situation is. Can we imagine a spittoon complaining to the potter, saying, "I wanted to be a dinner plate"? Can we imagine an ashtray complaining to the potter, saying, "I wanted to be a tea pitcher"? Spittoons and ashtrays do not have the right to complain to their maker.

Paul pushes the illustration further, saying, "Can't the potter take a single lump of clay (all of humanity) and make some things for honorable use (the elect) and others for dishonorable use?" The various types of vessels to be made are not determined by the clay. Indeed, if there were *two lumps* of clay, we might argue that one lump is destined for one end and the other lump for another end. The difference would lie somewhere within the qualities of the distinct lumps of clay. Paul rules this out, purposefully writing of "one lump of clay."⁸⁷ This also harkens back to Paul's initial illustration of the twins, Jacob and Esau, coming from the same mother by the same father.

Do you find yourself rebelling against the Word as you read that? Do you find yourself rebelling against the sovereignty of God? Are you searching desperately for some way to explain away the plain meaning of this text (shown to be plain by the consistent exegesis and interpretation of the entire passage as a whole)?⁸⁸

We also see here divine action. It is not possible to read this and think that the potter (God) is saying, "I am going to do whatever my foreknowledge informs me that I can do based on the decision of some to be ashtrays and some to be plates." No, the clay is in the potter's hands and bends to his decisions.

⁸⁴ See God's response to Job's complaining inquiries in Job 38. God answers, ² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. ⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." This continues through the rest of chapter 38, all of chapter 39 and into chapter 40, where God concludes by saying, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it" (Job 40:2).

⁸⁵ James White, Romans 9, www.aomin.org (accessed January 14, 2008).

⁸⁶ We understand the analogy but the potter/clay metaphor is not as common today. We might think of a carpenter and a piece of wood or a artist and a palette of colors.

⁸⁷ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 184-185.

⁸⁸ At this point, I must again ask: "Are we talking about nations here?" See the final verse of this section, where Paul mentions that the "vessels" are "from the Jews" and "from the Gentiles." This does not make sense in a nationalistic sense. In this section, we also note that the objector asks "*Who* can resist God's will?" This is individual.

What kind of decisions does the potter make concerning the clay? Paul continues to press the issue in verse 22-23. He asks, “What if God desires to show His wrath and make His power known (the exact same reasons why God raised up Pharaoh)?” Is that not a viable and important thing for God to do? God’s wrath is as much a part of His divine nature as His mercy. He is infinite in each aspect, along with all other of the divine attributes.⁸⁹

To make His wrath known, God exhibits great patience in dealing with the “vessels of wrath.” He did so for a particular reason: “to make known the riches of His glory for ‘vessels of mercy.’” These “vessels of mercy” are those whom He has “prepared for glory.” These are also the ones God has called, which ties the argument that began in 8:29-30 very neatly.

In no way is God unjust in any of this. If God hardens some, He is not unjust for that is what their sin deserves. If God “mercies” some, He is not unjust because He is dealing in mercy. We all deserve nothing but God’s holy judgment and wrath. If we receive what we deserve, no one can claim God is unjust. If we receive what we do not deserve (grace, mercy, compassion), then no one can claim God is unjust.⁹⁰

How to Reject This Teaching

Paul has been consistent throughout this entire section. From the beginning, God is the one doing all the action. There is no passivity at all. For all the verbs, God is the subject. He does all of this for the singular purpose of declaring His own glory. It is all about God. It is not about us at all. We do not like that! This destroys our egos and it destroys our religion. We do not want God to be God and we do not want God to be free – we want all the freedom for ourselves. Yet God is the only autonomously free being in the universe. Most religious faiths put forth the autonomous free will of the human and the subservience of the God to man’s will. However, in this passage, Paul argues that God is the possessor of autonomous free will, not man.

You may not want to accept this teaching. I understand that. When I first heard it, I was troubled as well. I was fully willing to reject the teaching of Scripture and bow to a higher authority – my personal desires and my long held theological tradition.

If you want to be a good consistent student of Scripture, you must do the following: Demonstrate that the above interpretation is insufficient and has abandoned the normal accepted methods of interpretation. You must prove that I have not accurately followed Paul’s arguments as they build and flow throughout the entire passage – as Paul wrote them. If your answer is built by jumping from section to section, I would submit that your

⁸⁹ It is at this point that many will say, “Satan is the one who prepares for destruction” or even “They prepared themselves for destruction.” It is as if the entire potter/clay analogy was not even in the immediate context. This type of argumentation is a clear and compelling indictment of men’s attempts to twist Scripture to meet their theological traditions.

⁹⁰ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 269-270, in Storms, *Chosen for Life*, 139.

method of interpretation is faulty. You must prove that I am making Paul contradict himself.

I hope you will not undertake that exercise. Instead, realize that this is what the text says. You may have never heard it. You may have read it but rationalized that it can't possible mean what it sounds like it means. It does and we praise God for it because this text describes a God who can be worshipped for all eternity!

How To Know If You Are Elect?

Some say that the doctrine of election should not be taught because it leads to doubt in the minds of believers. People will always be wondering, "Am I elect?" That is a good question to ask but it should not cause doubts.

Can you be sure that you are elect? Can you know that God has chosen you? There is one way to know and be sure: Keep believing in Jesus Christ. Does that seem simplistic? Ponder these questions:

1. Do you believe that your sins have offended the Holy Creator?
2. Do you believe that your sins cry out to heaven for justice and you deserve, along with all other sinners, to perish under the wrath of the Holy God you have offended?
3. Do you believe that you are/were, in fact, dead in their sins and unable to make yourself alive and acceptable to God on your own?
4. Do you believe that nothing you could ever do would ever be sufficient to appease the wrath of Almighty God?
5. Do you believe that God has Himself provided a way of escape through the sacrifice of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ?
6. Have you been united to Christ by faith, a faith you did not generate or earn but received as a gift from God?
7. Being united, do you believe that your sins are finally and fully paid for, you are forgiven and declared righteous in the sight of God?
8. Do you believe that you are now acceptable in the sight of God because of the atoning sacrifice made by Christ on your behalf and that upon death, God will allow you into His presence for eternity?

If you believe these things, you are exhibiting a key characteristic of the elect: the elect only believe in the gospel of Christ and continue in that faith. It is not our election that saves us – it is Christ.

However, election is important. R.B. Kuiper liked election to the foundation of a house. The foundation is important and essential yet it remains unseen. We enter a house, not through the foundation, but through the door (John 10:9). If we enter the kingdom of God, it must be through Jesus Christ. The elect of God are enabled by the power of God to believe the truth of the gospel so that they may enter through the door.