

The Election of God

An Overview of Romans 9

In Romans 9, the Apostle Paul describes the sovereignty of God in assigning roles for nations and individuals to carry out His divine plan and purposes. The interpretation of this passage in relation to the elective purposes of God has generated significant controversy through the years. Some people are not sure how this passage reconciles with other Scriptures which call upon all people to repent and believe the Gospel (John 1:7; Acts 17:30).

One solid principle of Bible interpretation is to use the clear and simple teachings of Scripture to help interpret the more difficult portions (2 Timothy 3:15; 2 Corinthians 11:3; 2 Peter 3:16). When we want to interpret some of the difficult passages of Paul, we should not be *ignorant* of the simpler Scriptures that can help guide our interpretation. We should not be *unstable* in our doctrinal understanding of simpler Scriptures. Therefore, we should approach the more difficult passages with *firm knowledge* and *doctrinal stability* from the *simpler* Bible doctrines that are more easily understood.

By understanding divine election, we know that the goodness of God will ultimately triumph over all evil, because God works all things according to the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11). It is comforting to know that God's overall plan is not contingent upon man's choices. It cannot be thwarted by evil.

Additionally, we know that the election of God does not prevent any honest seeker from finding salvation (Romans 10:13; Revelation 22:17). God is not willing that any should perish, but rather invites all to come to repentance and live (2 Peter 3:9). Through His atonement, Christ tasted death for the benefit of every man (Hebrews 2:9). He was lifted up on the cross that He might draw all people unto Himself (John 12:32). It is His will and desire to have everyone saved (1 Timothy 2:4). God's will does not obstruct the will of man in accepting Christ. Rather, God's will empowers our will to accept Christ so that by His power we can be born from above.

None of us should suppose that we understand all that is involved in God's election (His eternal will, choices, and plans), because outside of what He has chosen to reveal, His ways are beyond our comprehension (Romans 11:33). Therefore, we should not use our speculative or logical reasoning to interpret election in a way that is contrary to the rest of the Bible. Rather we should try to understand what we can about election by using the simpler teachings of Scripture on repentance, faith, salvation, and the atonement to guide us in our understanding of election.

To look at each verse in this chapter would be beyond the scope of this article. We intend to give an overview that identifies the two main components of election—*conditional* and *unconditional*. By *unconditional*, we mean the plans of God that *do not* require human cooperation, and therefore depend on God alone. By *conditional*, we mean the plans of God that *do* require human cooperation, and therefore depend on human responses and human responsibility. The election of God is a composite of the *unconditional* aspects and the *conditional* aspects of the plans, choices, and will of God. These two components may be further divided between *corporate* and *individual* aspects of election.

Let us notice first from this chapter the *unconditional* aspects of election.

1. Unconditional Election

a. God's choice of the nation of Israel

Israel's calling as a nation, as distinct from the Gentile nations, is a central theme of Romans 9. The choice of Israel over other nations was based solely on God's unconditional election and not on their greatness or goodness. Deuteronomy 7:6-8 declares this truth: "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

Paul uses the calling of individuals to illustrate the unconditional nature of Israel's election to the privileges of a special nation. God chose to begin His nation with the calling of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give birth to His special people. God made these choices in accordance with His own counsel. He made the choice and then swore an oath that He would keep it (Deuteronomy 1:8). God's gracious choice was made without human merit.

b. God's choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

The promise to Abraham of a great nation was miraculously fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. There was nothing that Abraham and Sarah could do to have a son. Their aged bodies were dead to conception; but Sarah conceived according to the promise of God. When Abraham and Sarah willed to have a child, they could not. When God willed for them to have a son, Sarah conceived. Ishmael was born of natural reproduction and Isaac was born of divine reproduction according to God's election.

The fulfillment of the promise was continued with God's choice of Jacob over Esau. In Genesis 25:23, two national roles are represented for the sons of Isaac. It was solely God's choice to use Jacob to represent the eventual nation of Israel, and to make that nation prominent over the nation of Esau (Edom).

"And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger." (Genesis 25:23)

As an individual, Esau never served Jacob; in fact, Jacob lived in fear of Esau for part of his life. However, God's role for Jacob would bring him and his seed into prominence over the line of Esau. In time, Esau became bitter at the unconditional aspect of God's sovereignty, his loss of a birthright, and the loss of his father's greatest blessing.

The selection of the younger for a godly seed is a recurring pattern throughout the Bible. We can see this illustrated in Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and in the story of the prodigal son and his elder brother. In each of these cases, God chose to bless the younger even though he had no right to claim the birthright and blessings of the older. This exemplifies God's sovereign choice to extend special grace to those who do not deserve it. Thus, those who do not merit His special favor carry out God's gracious plan in His kingdom on earth.

c. The potter and the clay

The reference in Romans 9 to the potter and the clay comes from Jeremiah 18:1-11. The potter and the clay represent God's decisions regarding national roles. The unconditional aspects of God's choices are described in verses 3-6: "Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel." (Jeremiah 18:3-6)

God says He has power over the clay to make vessels unto honor or dishonor. This is referring to the national prominence that God has assigned for Israel. God has a right to make decisions with no regard for man's opinion on His choices.

These aspects of God's sovereign choices demonstrate His power and His unmerited grace. God's overall plan involved calling a nation to bring forth the Messiah. God made choices in the lives of individuals to fulfill His choice of a nation. These examples give us a picture of the unconditional aspects of our salvation. God freely chose to create man with the ability to sin. He made the plan of salvation.

God has decided many things in our lives over which we have no control. If we don't accept His choices for us, we will become bitter. On the other hand, we can fully receive all His marvelous grace without having deserved any of it. He loves us because He chose to and because He wants to.

Next, we notice from Romans 9 the *conditional* aspects of election.

2. Conditional Election

a. Human response to the Potter's choice

The unconditional aspects of God's election do not make *all* aspects of His election unconditional. Notice the Potter's words below from Jeremiah 18 regarding other nations who were not part of God's special elect seed.

"At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them." (Jeremiah 18:7-10)

God's elective choices among the nations have conditions of human response. In fact, the Potter's choices anticipate a human response. Likewise, Romans 9 shows that the Gentiles who were originally vessels of *dishonor* could now become vessels of *honor* by receiving the Gospel. God's corporate election of Israel did not guarantee the individual salvation of all the Israelites, nor did it prevent individual Gentiles from receiving the Gospel.

b. Abraham and Sarah: the response of faith

The miraculous birth of Isaac was a result of the sovereign choice by God that was also linked to the personal faith of Abraham and Sarah (Romans 4:19-21; Hebrews 11:11). While God has the freedom to

act independently from us, many times He chooses to engage our response. Both Abraham and Sarah chose to believe the promise of God, and were strengthened through their personal faith to participate in its fulfillment.

c. Edom: the response of rejection

What does the phrase mean, *“Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated?”*

Notice that this phrase was not spoken at the birth of Jacob and Esau as individuals. Rather, it was spoken as a commentary upon the nation of Edom (who were Esau’s descendants) for demonstrating perpetual hatred against God and Israel.

God made this love/hate statement in response to Edom’s (Esau’s) rejection of God’s plans for Israel. They made a confederacy of nations in an attempt to destroy Israel (Psalm 83:1-6). They told Babylon to raze the city of Jerusalem to the ground when it was conquered (Psalm 137:7). They tried to possess the land God promised to Israel (Ezekiel 36:5). They chased down and killed the Jews who escaped from the Babylonian troops when Israel was conquered (Amos 1:11).

After these events, we find this statement in Romans 9:13: *“Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.”* (Paul was quoting from Malachi 1:2-3.) Edom (Esau) became “hated” because they had rejected God’s right to unconditionally choose and love Israel as His special people.

Remember that God does love the world, and Christ came to seek and save the lost; but God’s *special* love is reserved for those who love Him in return. Esau was not *specially* loved like Jacob because he did not reciprocate God’s love. It is also true that God is angry with the wicked (Psalm 7:11), and His wrath is upon the children of disobedience (Colossians 3:6). In this sense, He *hated* Esau. However, God still commanded Israel to treat the Edomites respectfully: *“Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite, for he is thy brother”* (Deuteronomy 23:7).

d. Pharaoh: another response of rejection

Pharaoh is a personal illustration of the principles of conditional and unconditional election. Moses asked Pharaoh to let Israel go that they might serve the Lord. Pharaoh rejected God’s sovereignty over the nation of Israel and asserted his own sovereign right to rule over them. He said, “Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice?” (Exodus 5:2) Pharaoh was challenging God to a contest of sovereignty. In that contest, Pharaoh challenged God and hardened his own heart at times. At other times, God correspondingly hardened Pharaoh’s heart. The case of Pharaoh illustrates how God can sovereignly harden a hard heart that refuses to recognize His sovereignty, and at the same time show mercy upon an unworthy Israel by delivering them from bondage.

God will have mercy on whom He chooses and will harden whom He chooses (Romans 9:18). In Egypt, He showed both His goodness and His severity at the same time. Pharaoh rejected God’s sovereignty and Israel accepted it. God based His judgment on their responses to His sovereignty. Pharaoh is an example of both *unconditional election* when God hardened his heart, and *conditional election* when he challenged God and hardened his own heart.

e. The responses of Israel and the Gentiles

Israel had all the benefits of God's unconditional national election to the promises and privileges (Romans 9:4-5). But they largely lost their salvation because they did not meet the conditional requirements of God's election of grace. They sought it by the merit of their good works and their national election status (Romans 9:31-33).

The Gentiles, who did not have the right of unconditional national election to the privileges and promises, met all the conditions of God's election to salvation and were saved by God's gracious choice to accept them. God's election of the Jews to salvation did not exclude the Gentiles from salvation. God is never "willing" that any would perish. He takes no pleasure in the damnation of souls. The Gentile believers, like the Jewish patriarchs, became vessels of mercy by faith while most of the chosen Jewish nation became vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.

3. Concluding Thoughts

As we have seen, God's election includes unconditional and conditional components as well as corporate and individual aspects. To draw balanced conclusions, we need to see all aspects of the truth that God has revealed to us. We will never completely know where the lines are between God's election and our choices. What we do know is that if God promises something, He will carry it out. If He gives us a commandment, He will also give us the grace we need to perform it.

God has graciously chosen to save us through Jesus Christ. His offer is free wherever sin abounds. Our salvation is upheld by His gracious choice to freely save us. What are the conditions to being one of His elect? We must accept God's sovereign choices and plan for our life. We must respond to His Lordship in faith and humility. God has given sinners the grace they need to say, "Lord, I believe your Word. I accept your plan of salvation. I want Jesus to save me; and I choose to yield to Your call and the choices that You have made for my life." In this way, our choices are merged with God's election and we are assured that we are one of His elect.

Not all men are called in the same way. God does not use the extreme and even irresistible measures with some that He uses with others. Yet none are excluded. All are invited by the Spirit and the Bride. Whosoever will may come, because God has chosen to give the water of life *freely*! (See Revelation 22:17.)

There are two over-arching principles relating to the election of God. First, He wants a godly people who will carry on a godly heritage; that is represented in His corporate election of Israel and the church. His corporate election guarantees there will always be a godly seed. As Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Thus, God's plan is always assured.

Secondly, He wants individuals to personally embrace the Gospel of salvation by the free grace of God, and come under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The chosen godly heritage is to be the torchbearer of truth to those outside the family of God. God's choice of a church does not exclude the unchurched in His plan for salvation. He welcomes them individually into His corporate elected body—the church.

God also asks that we as believers give individual diligence to make our election sure by responding in faith and love to His gracious love and sovereign choices for our lives (2 Peter 1:10). The Gospel of free grace is offered to the world by God's universal love for mankind (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). However, to

experience God's special love in our hearts, a personal faith is required that responds to the call of the Spirit (Romans 5:5).

We should view the doctrine of election in a positive way. It means that when we love Him, we know that He has already loved us. We are assured that our lives are not governed by chance or fate. Believers need not fear God's choices and plan for their lives.

God's eternal purposes are interwoven into our lives. Our lives have meaning because God is overseeing them and we are under His love, guidance, and providence. In the final analysis, God's plan for His people is assured from beginning to end by the mighty power of God.

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