

Sovereignty Part 1 – God’s Right to Call and to Choose

Romans 9:6-29 on September 24, 2023

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Please read Romans 9:6-29 before going further in this transcript.

Last week we dug into the first 5 verses of Romans 9 together, and we explored some of Ethnic Israel’s spiritual heritage. We spent time probing into 8 unique spiritual privileges that this particular people group enjoyed like no other people group on the planet! After such a long history as God’s particular, chosen people, it seems like more of them should have embraced the gospel. After all, the origins of the gospel go way back into Israel’s history. In fact, Paul stated this clearly in the very beginning of his letter to the Romans. Romans 1:1-2 begins, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God - the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.” Considering their privileged access to the Old Testament, which gave them an insiders’ view of the gospel’s progression throughout time, WHY did SO many of the Israelites seem to miss it? In Romans 9:6 and following, Paul goes on to answer some unwritten, but related questions that were likely on a lot of people’s minds in the 1st century church:^{1 2}

- Has the gospel failed the Israelite people?
- Has God given up on His chosen people?
- Has God failed to follow through on His Old Testament words of promise?

Paul begins with a clear declaration in Romans 9:6, “It is NOT as though God’s word had failed....” So as we dig further into Romans 9, we find Paul defending God’s integrity, as well as declaring God’s sovereign right to call and to choose as He sees fit.³ As Paul teaches us more about the gospel, we’ll see how the gospel reveals God’s sovereign master plan of salvation.

Today’s text demonstrates God’s sovereignty in at least 6 ways. First of all,

God’s sovereignty is demonstrated...

1) ...through choosing Isaac over Ishmael: the gospel is grounded in God’s promise, not our biological ancestry.

Romans 9:6 says, “It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” Paul is

¹ “By the time Paul wrote Romans... It was composed of many gentiles and relatively few Jews. We are so accustomed to this situation that it creates no surprise or shock. But this simple fact was one of the most difficult theological issues that the early church had to face. The Old Testament appears to promise that the messianic salvation will be for Jews, with some gentiles allowed in.... Why, then, was Israel not being redeemed, as the Old Testament has promised? Why was the church a mainly gentile body? ...if the gospel could not truly be seen as the continuation of God’s plan from the Old Testament, then it would cease to be the gospel of God (Romans 1:2).” Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, pp. 130-131.

² This probably doesn’t feel nearly as strange to us today in northern Minnesota. There are certainly a few Jewish people in our area, and a number of them have placed their faith in Christ, but we’ve grown accustomed to being a mostly Gentile church. Mr. Allen Benson recently shared a really cool salvation story with me about a former Jewish Bemidji Mayor named Fred Troppman. He’s mentioned here <http://bemidjihistory.com/wordpress/?p=454> What’s not mentioned is that, in his late 90’s, he finally accepted Jesus as his Messiah!

³ “Israel is not, finally, the main topic of these chapters. The main topic is the integrity of God.” Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 130.

distinguishing here between physical Israel and spiritual Israel, between the flesh and blood family of Israel and the spiritual family of God, untied through faith in Christ.⁴ These two different Israels are displayed by two very different births. The birth of Ishmael, which displayed the human effort of Abraham and Sarah to accomplish God's will through their own efforts. And the birth of Isaac, which displayed God's sovereign provision, and His faithfulness to keep His promise through a miraculous birth. We learned about some of this back in Romans 4, where the promise came by faith. Abraham believed against all human odds, that he and his elderly wife, who was well beyond childbearing age, would indeed have a son. God had sovereignly declared that it would happen, and His promise did not fail; so God's word absolutely didn't fail! The failure was on the part of any Israelite, who stubbornly trusted in their own biological ancestry, rather than trusting in the promise of God. Romans 9:8 says, "In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."⁵ As we'll see even more clearly at the end of Romans 9 and into Romans 10, it was Israel's failure to believe that kept them from God's salvation.^{6 7 8} So Paul isn't denying Israel's unique place in God's master redemptive plan, but he is setting the record straight as to God's integrity, and His gospel faithfulness to the children of the promise. God never promised that every Israelite would be saved. God's word has been clear about this all throughout the Old Testament, that only some of the Israelites will prove to be children of the promise.⁹

God's sovereignty is also demonstrated...

2) ...through choosing Jacob over Esau: the gospel is directed by God's election, not by our behavior.

Romans 9:11-13 says, "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." Paul moves to the next obvious chapter in salvation history, from Abraham to his son Isaac, who married Rebekah and had twin sons with her. Against the cultural norms, God chose in advance that the older would serve the younger. It's pretty hard to miss the main point here, neither Jacob nor Esau could take any credit, or any blame, for God's choice. Paul highlights God's sovereign design for the gospel: it is directed by His election, not

⁴ "Physical descent is no guarantee of a place in God's spiritual family." (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1904 footnote on Romans 9:6.)

⁵ Last week we talked about Israel's corporate "adoption to sonship" in Romans 9:4, which granted them many advantages, but it did NOT guarantee them salvation. There's a segment of Israel who believes, and a segment who do not believe, and only those who place their faith in God are children of the promise, and thus Abraham's spiritual descendants. The fact that it's about faith, and not biological ancestry, is the very reason why we Gentiles can also be included among these children of the promise.

⁶ As we noted last week, "the problem of Israel is its FAILURE to embrace the salvation offered in Christ." Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 132.

⁷ John 1:11 says that "[Jesus] came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." He came to His own creation, but much of that creation did not receive their Creator, including a large number of Israelites.

⁸ Back in Romans 3:3 Paul said it this way, "...Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?" And the answer is "no." God's integrity is completely intact; He has been faithful to keep His word according to His sovereign plans.

⁹ Consider John 8:30-47, especially verses 37-40.

by our behavior. A simple definition for the word “election” is “choice”;¹⁰ the point being, in verse 11, that God’s choice obviously couldn’t be based on works, on anything that anyone did or didn’t do.¹¹ After all, the twins hadn’t even been born yet! In the midst of this reality, God had already decided how things were going to be; it was predetermined, predestined to be a certain way by God’s effectual will.¹² Before the twins were even born, God elected that Jacob would have His favor, and Esau would not. We’re going to explore the doctrine of election in more depth next week, but for today, suffice it to say that these verses underscore God’s absolute sovereignty: He has every right to call and to choose as He sees fit.

Verse 13 causes many of us at least some degree of concern, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” How can God hate the guy when he hasn’t even been born yet? Ultimately, this is really just a way of emphasizing, “Jacob I chose, but Esau I rejected.”^{13 14 15} But even if that may help us to navigate the word “hate” a little better, it doesn’t change the feeling of unfairness. 2 Peter 3:15 comes to mind, “[Paul’s] letters contain some things that are hard to understand.” (*This seems to be one of those things!*) The point that Paul is driving home here is still in relation to verse 6, that God’s word has not failed. In other words, it’s not as though God ever promised that all Israel would be chosen. In fact, much to the opposite, as verse 13 makes clear, God’s track record throughout the Old Testament signals pretty clearly, that only some would be chosen, and others would not be. Now this may make some of us uncomfortable, but that certainly didn’t stop Paul from writing it, under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, so we need to wrestle our way through this dimension of God’s sovereignty. In fact, Paul seems to recognize that a number of us will wrestle with this, so he addresses this very concern in verses 14 and following.¹⁶ Let’s take a look at those now...

God’s sovereignty is demonstrated...

3) ...through Moses and Pharaoh: the gospel is revealed in God’s choice to show mercy and to harden. Romans 9:14-15 asks, “What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! 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.” It is God’s sovereign right to dispense His mercy in whatever way He sees fit, whenever, wherever, and to whomever He pleases.¹⁷ In fact, if you think about it, if we could force God to be merciful to us, then He’d no longer be in sovereign control of His own gracious nature. As New Testament scholar Douglas Moo puts it, “His mercy always is a gift to be

¹⁰ Election can also sometimes refer specifically to “predestination to eternal life.” However, the general definition has to do with “the right, power, or privilege of making a choice.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/election>

¹¹ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1905 footnote on Romans 9:12.

¹² There is much written on God’s will. His effectual will, His moral will, His sovereign will. All kinds of adjectives and descriptors. John Piper asks the intriguing question, “Are There Two Wills in God?” It’s worth a read: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god>

¹³ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1905 footnote on Romans 9:13.

¹⁴ It would be sort of like me saying something like this about my wife: “Debbie, I chose, but all other women I’ve rejected.” It’s not that I literally “hate” all other women, but in comparison with choosing Debbie, I’ve rejected all the rest.

¹⁵ Regarding Ishmael, consider Genesis 16:15, 21:8-21 and Malachi 1:1-5.

¹⁶ Although I’m not sure he makes things any easier as he goes on...

¹⁷ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1905 footnote on Romans 9:15.

gratefully received, never a wage that we are owed.”¹⁸ As personal beneficiaries of God’s mercy, we might want to be careful not to complain too loudly about how God chooses to dispense His mercy.¹⁹ After all, if God chose to deal with each one of us according to what our sins deserve, then none of us would get mercy; we’d all be destined to perish.^{20 21 22 23}

Romans 9:17-18 goes on to mention the Egyptian Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelite people, “For Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” 18 Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” According to God’s sovereign plan, He raised Pharaoh up to this position of authority in order to display His own mighty power and to make the name of Yahweh great by having it proclaimed throughout all the earth. God can do whatever He wants to do for His own glory. Indeed, is there anyone who hasn’t heard of the ten plagues in Egypt, and of God’s mighty display of power in parting the Red Sea? Even staunch non-believers, and people from other religions, have heard of this historic event, when the living God paved the way for His people to walk across on dry land!²⁴ Verse 18 mentions God hardening whoever He wants to harden. In Exodus 14:4,17 the LORD explains it this way, “And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.... I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.”²⁵ Texts like this make it abundantly clear: the sovereignty of God operates in both salvation and condemnation, like two sides of the same gospel coin.²⁶ In all these things God receives the glory, and humankind is reminded that the LORD does indeed exist, and that He is not to be trifled with.²⁷

¹⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 136.

¹⁹ Job 38:2 comes to mind, “Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?”

²⁰ Consider Psalm 130, especially vv. 3-4, “If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.”

²¹ Paul goes on in Romans 9:16, “It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.”

Remembering this wonderful truth that God operates from a system of MERCY, rather than from a system of HUMAN EFFORTS, should cause each one of us to bow in worship, and give thanks to the Lord for His goodness! This is what makes the end of Romans 9, verses 31-32, so sad.

²² It’s only because of God’s mercy, that any of us can be saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Were it not for God’s mercy, there would be no adequate path to salvation. Were it not for God’s mercy, none of us could stand. See Romans 5:1-2, “we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

²³ Titus 3:4-6 says, “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

²⁴ See Exodus 14:17-18; Joshua 2:10-11; 1 Samuel 4:8; and Psalm 76:10; 114.

²⁵ See also Exodus 7:3; 9:12 and Joshua 11:20.

²⁶ We shouldn’t think for a second that each and every person on the planet hasn’t earned their own condemnation. See *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2309 footnote on Romans 9:18.

²⁷ Even as we learn about God’s sovereign right to harden whoever He wants to harden; we should also remember that we humans often harden our own hearts. We talked about this back in Romans 1, how humankind has rejected their Creator, “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts” (Romans 1:18-32, especially verse 24). “Nine times in Exodus the hardening of the pharaoh’s heart is ascribed to God; another nine times the pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart. The pharaoh alone was the agent of the hardening in each of the first five plagues. Not until the

Now verse 18 may make it seem like God is rather arbitrary with all of this, like He's just randomly choosing who gets mercy and who gets hardened.²⁸ But the broader context of Romans reveals that all of humanity has gone far afield on their own. When we get to Romans 10, we'll read clear declarations about Israel's failure to "submit to God's righteousness" and how they were "a disobedient and obstinate people."²⁹ Not to mention that way back in Romans 1, we learned how all of humankind has rejected their Creator, and "their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened."³⁰ So the God of the universe has every right to have mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and to harden whom he wants to harden.³¹

God's sovereignty is also demonstrated...

4) ...in the Potter's choice of objects for wrath and mercy: the gospel makes the riches of God's glory known to us. Again Paul anticipates what many of us are probably thinking in Romans 9:19-20, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?' 20 But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Verse 19 gets at the crux of this tension between God's sovereign will and our human free will. How can we humans be held responsible for what God is causing to happen? We'll wrestle through this question a bit more next week, but for today, let's note that Paul's immediate response is found in verse 20 >>> Who are we to question God? In verse 20 Paul is actually quoting from Isaiah, which is why part of the verse is in quotation marks.³² You see, we're not the first people to wonder about what God is up to in these kinds of situations. To be clear, this verse isn't necessarily forbidding us from asking God to help us understand our situation. In fact, when we go to God in prayer, we should pour out our questions and concerns to our Abba Father. Paul's words here, serve as a warning against taking on a disrespectful attitude that questions God's character, as though somehow He's making a mistake or doing something wrong. The living God who created the entire universe is not answerable to us, we are answerable to Him!³³

Paul then poses a hypothetical question in Romans 9:22-23, "What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the

sixth plague did God confirm the pharaoh's willful action." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 102 footnote on Exodus 4:21.

²⁸ Verse 18 "Cannot mean that God is arbitrary in his mercy, because Paul ultimately bases God's rejection of Israel on her unbelief (see verses 30-32)." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1905 footnote on Romans 9:18.

²⁹ See Romans 10, verses 3 and 21.

³⁰ See Romans 1:21.

³¹ But all of this does stand in the context of our stubborn human rebellion, and the willful hardening of our own hearts against Him. Let's also keep in mind that, "First, Paul teaches in Romans 11 that God can remove his hardening.... Second, God's hardening, while not determined by a person's own decision, nevertheless is a response to the general condition of human sinfulness.... He hardens people who have already determined (in the sin of Adam) to rebel against God and to go their own way." Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 2nd Ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 136.

³² See Isaiah 29:16; 45:9.

³³ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1905 footnote on Romans 9:20.

objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? 23 What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory?” This phrase in verse 22, “bore with great patience” brings to mind Romans 2:4, which taught us that God’s kind patience is intended to lead us to repentance. But some people choose to continue in their wickedness and rebellion, and they reject God’s patient waiting for their repentance. So God bears them with great patience, but He doesn’t bear them forever, eventually the objects of His wrath will be destroyed. God is sovereign over those who will be saved, and He is also sovereign over those who will be condemned.³⁴ ³⁵ Verse 23 once again puts a spotlight on God’s right to make His glory known. But Paul now adds to this idea, by reminding us, of how those of us who are in Christ, are the beneficiaries of God’s gracious and sovereign will. This is talking about you and me folks! Those of us who have trusted Christ are the objects of God’s mercy! We are the ones who are being prepared in advance to share in His glory!³⁶

Now being an object of God’s mercy is nothing that we’ve earned or done something to deserve. Apart from Christ, we are just as deserving of God’s wrath as anyone else. So the sobering reality of God’s wrath gives us a deeper appreciation of His underserved mercy. I like how New Testament scholar Tom Schreiner says it: “The mercy of God would not be impressed on the consciousness of human beings apart from the exercise of God’s wrath, just as one delights more richly in the warmth [and] beauty... of spring after one has experienced the cold blast of winter.”³⁷ The gospel makes the riches of God’s glory known to us!

God’s sovereignty is also demonstrated...

5) ...through Hosea’s prophecy: the gospel was planned by God to be “A Gospel for All Peoples.” Romans 9:25 recalls God’s Old Testament promise, “As he says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” My Study Bible notes that “In the original context, these passages from Hosea refer to the spiritual restoration of Israel. But Paul finds in them the principle that God is a saving, forgiving, restoring God, who delights to take those who are ‘not my people’ and make them ‘my people.’” Paul then applies this principle to

³⁴ Douglas Moo gives 3 possible explanations for God’s patience with the objects of His wrath: 1. God is waiting for sinful rebels to repent. 2. God is waiting to manifest His full justice at the final judgment. 3. God is making the riches of His glory known to the rest of us (v. 23). Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, top left p. 138.

³⁵ I appreciate Douglas Moo’s comment here: “We must remember... that people are judged, finally, because, in Adam, they have chosen to reject God. We will never fully understand the ways of God in moving history along to its intended goal, but we can always trust God to act in complete integrity as he does so.” Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 138.

³⁶ Verse 24 clarifies that we Jews and Gentiles are CALLED into this TOGETHER. See also Romans 8:30.

³⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 511.

Gentiles, whom God makes his people.”^{38 39 40} And so, we see an even broader implication to God’s sovereign plans for Israel, His sovereign plans to make His gospel available to all peoples. It is not only God’s right to call all peoples, it is His delight to call all peoples!⁴¹ We’ll see this continue to unfold as we make our way through Romans: It’s not just His right, it’s His delight!

Last of all, God’s sovereignty is demonstrated...

6) ...through Isaiah’s prophecy: the gospel foresaw God’s faithful plan for the remnant.

Romans 9:27-28 says, “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. 28 For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.’” The original context for these verses was God’s promise to Israel to bring her back from captivity in Assyria and Babylon. Paul now quotes it here as another example of what he’s been defending all along, God’s word has not failed.⁴² God has guided and warned the people of Israel all throughout their history, but only a small segment of them remained faithful to Him, so only the remnant would be saved.^{43 44} The gospel foresaw God’s faithful plan to preserve the remnant. We’ll talk about this in much greater detail when we get to Romans 11. For now, suffice it to say that the prophets agree with the patriarchs. The prophecies of Hosea and Isaiah agree with the spiritual heritage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as the story of Moses & Pharaoh, and the object lesson of the Potter and the clay. All of these come together to magnify and glorify God’s sovereignty. Brother or Sister in Christ, our God has the right to call and to choose as He sees fit!

³⁸ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1905 footnote on Romans 9:25-26.

³⁹ In its original context, “the ‘not my people’ of Hosea [refers to] the northern tribes of Israel. Paul, reading this prophecy in light of the Abrahamic promises, [applies] this phrase to include Gentiles as well.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2310 footnote on Romans 9:24-29.

⁴⁰ “Hosea was predicting the return of the ten northern tribes of Israel, not the conversion of the gentiles.” See also further explanation on this page and the following by Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, pp. 138-139.

⁴¹ See Psalm 147:11.

⁴² “The fact that so many Jews in Paul’s day had not accepted Christ does not mean that God’s word had failed (v. 6). For God’s word itself reveals that ‘only the remnant will be saved’ (v. 27). Unfaithful Israelites will be judged (v. 28), but God is faithful to his people... ..[His blessing is only applied to those who are faithful to Him].” Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 139.

⁴³ “Isaiah speaks words of both warning and promise to Israel. Many Israelites had been unfaithful to God’s covenant, leaving only a ‘remnant’ to be saved. But God commits himself to preserve this remnant in faithfulness to his promises to Israel.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2310 footnote on Romans 9:24-29.

⁴⁴ These quotations from Isaiah indicate that, by God’s sovereign design and choosing, and also in relation to their own sinful rebellion, only a small remnant of the Israelites will be saved. See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1905 footnote on Romans 9:27-29.