Our Choice
Romans 9:14-29

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 8, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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14 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."**

16 It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. 17 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.

19 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?'" 21 Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

22 What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the 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— 24 even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? 25 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,"**

26 and,

> **"In the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'children of the living God.'"**

27 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."**

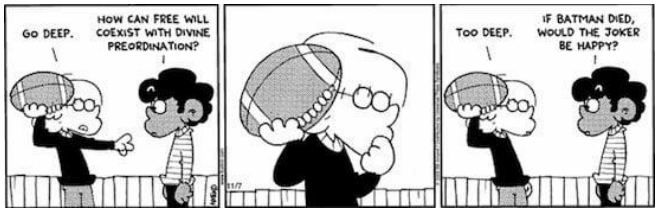
29 It is just as Isaiah said previously:

> **"Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah."**

(Romans 9:14-29, NIV)

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A little levity from the cartoon strip Foxtrot to begin a challenging message this morning is probably helpful.



Too deep? In the end, yes, none of us are going to be able to wrap our minds completely around these seemingly contradictory truths, that God chooses us *and* that we also choose God. But that doesn't mean there is nothing we can say or understand about these things. The fact that scripture, specifically here in Romans 9, speaks directly to these questions affirms that there can be some level of understanding here. So let's do our best together, with God's help, to try and understand what the Lord wants us to understand in his Word.

In an effort to keep things as clear as possible, I'm going to list some biblical truths in a logical order that I hope we all can follow. I'll highlight each truth for emphasis.

To begin with, scripture is clear on this point: **THE LORD IS SOVEREIGN IN ALL THINGS.** In Ephesians 1:11, Paul describes God as one who **"works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his**

will."[1] When he says "everything" he means "everything." The Lord possesses supreme, absolute, unchallenged authority to rule over all things. Nothing can ever frustrate God's will. This includes all things in creation, from the smallest details of our lives, to whole governments and cultures, to even sin and evil, which would not exist if God did not allow them to exist. The most powerful people in the world are mere pawns before God. Proverbs 21:1 declares, **"In the Lord's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him."**[2] Simply put, if the Lord is not sovereign, then the Lord is not God. I hope you agree. Nothing else that follows will hold up if we don't first acknowledge this foundational reality.

Here's a second truth we need to affirm: **WE ALL DESERVE GOD'S CONDEMNATION AND WE CANNOT SAVE OURSELVES.** Paul is clear earlier in Romans: **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."**[3] And then later, **"The wages of sin is death."**[4] In fact, the Bible often uses death as a way to describe our spiritual state resulting from our sin.[5] Understand what this means. If you are dead, what can you do for yourself? Nothing! There is a concept in Christian theology called total depravity that states that every part of our human nature – our minds, wills, emotions, flesh – all of it is totally depraved by sin and leaves us spiritually dead, completely unable to save ourselves. And you might say, "*Every* part of us? Really? Are we all completely corrupt?" When asked about this one time, American theologian Dallas Willard responded, "I don't know about total depravity, but I do believe in sufficient depravity."[6] In the end, what's the difference? Total or sufficient, either is enough to make us unable to save ourselves. So to put it plainly, if you believe that you deserve God's favor and salvation because of your own goodness, efforts, or merits, then nothing else I have to say today will make any sense to you. In fact, the Christian gospel itself will make no sense to you.

Are we together? God is absolutely sovereign. We are absolutely deserving of his condemnation. That leads to this next truth: **IN HIS SOVEREIGNTY, THE LORD CHOOSES SOME WHO ARE UNDESERVING TO BE SAVED ANYWAY BY GRACE.** This was our focus last week. The biblical word for this is "election." In the original language the word translated "election" literally means "to pull out" or "to choose."[7] If this is a very hard truth for you to accept, I implore you to search the scriptures to see if, in fact, this is what God's Word teaches. You will find that it does teach this. For one, the Bible is clear that nobody can choose to be saved on their own unless God *first chooses them.* Romans 3:10-11 declare this about us, **"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God."** Not only are none of us righteous, but none of us even seeks God! In the last chapter Paul made clear, **"The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, *nor can it do so."***[8] And in case you think Paul has just gone rogue with this idea, Jesus himself declared, **"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them."**[9] We are dead in our sins, and dead people can't choose anything. God always, always, always chooses us first.

Paul uses the example of Moses and Pharaoh here to make this point, Israel's great hero and Israel's great enemy. God chose one and not the other. The Lord makes clear in verse 15, **"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."** Later, in verse 18, he goes as far as to say that he even hardens the hearts of those he wants to harden. To be clear, if you are chosen it's not because of your desire or effort. Paul says that explicitly in verse 16. If you are chosen it's only and always because of God's mercy. God chooses some and hardens some. Isn't that what Paul is saying? Isn't that what God's Word is teaching us?

I know what many of you want to say in response. Many of you have said this to me this past week. "It's not fair! I simply cannot believe in a God who would chose only some to be saved." But again, think about what we have already established is true. If God is sovereign, and if all of us deserve to be condemned, deserve NOT to be chosen, then the wonder is not that some are chosen and some are not chosen. The wonder is that any are chosen at all!

That leads to this next truth: **IF GOD, IN HIS SOVEREIGNTY, CHOOSES EVEN ONE PERSON TO BE SAVED, THAT MAKES GOD, BY DEFINITION, MERCIFUL.** Or at least more merciful than he needs to be. You know, we protest the doctrine of election because it doesn't seem fair. Be careful. The last thing you want is for God to be fair, because being fair is giving people what they deserve, and we've already covered what that would mean for us. Be thankful God is not fair with us. If he is, no one is saved. And so if the Lord even saves one of us by mercy, then the Lord has been more than fair.

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[1] This and all other biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).
[2] That puts election day in perspective, doesn't it!
[3] Romans 3:23
[4] Romans 6:23
[5] In Ephesians 2:1 Paul writes, **"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins…"**
[6] Source unknown
[7] See https://biblehub.com/greek/1589.htm
[8] Romans 8:7. Emphasis mine.
[9] John 6:44

But just one person saved and billions others condemned? Is that the extent of God's mercy? Thankfully, no. And that leads to our next truth: **GOD'S DESIRE IS THAT ALL WOULD BE SAVED.** We covered this last week, but by way of review, Jeremiah 29:13 declares, **"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."** That implies that *all* who seek God will find God. Jesus said as much in his teaching: **"Seek and you will find."**[10] 2nd Peter 3:9 puts this even more clearly, **"[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."** Mostly, of course, we see this in the heart of Jesus. Get to know Jesus and you discover in him a love for even the most undeserving of us. And what we find in the heart of Jesus is what we find in the heart of God. He desires everyone to be saved.

So if this is the case, why isn't everybody chosen and saved, because we know that not all are saved. Just read Jesus' parables in Matthew 25 for starters. In three consecutive parables Jesus makes clear that foolish virgins are kept out of the banquet feast in the end because the Lord doesn't even know them, and that foolish servants who squander the master's entrusted resources are thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the "goats" who neglected the least of these in this world will go away to eternal punishment. That's what Jesus tells us, that not all are saved. But why? Again, if God is sovereign and can choose who he wants to choose, and even though we're all undeserving he still wants all to be saved, why are some chosen and others not?

That's actually the question Paul anticipates us asking. In verse 19 he writes, **"One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will.'"** In other words, how can God blame us for anything if he's in charge of everything? If the big decisions are made, what say do we have in it?[11] Before we look at the answer according to scripture, let's look at what the answer is not.

GOD DOES NOT CREATE SINFUL HUMAN BEINGS JUST SO THAT HE CAN PUNISH THEM. The name for this widely-held idea is double-predestination. It states that before creation God predestined some to be saved and others to be damned, and nothing about the way we live or what we believe can ever change our pre-determined fate. I don't believe this idea is taught in scripture when we look at scripture as a whole. Specifically, the previous and clear truth that God desires all to be saved outrightly dismisses this idea.

At the same time, that does not mean that we can then reject the truth of God's election, that he chooses those who are saved. Let me put it this way with another truth: **TO REJECT ELECTION IS TO REJECT GRACE.** Again, the truth of election is that there is nothing in you that deserved anything except God's condemnation, that you were dead in your sin, but that out of mercy, and *only* out of mercy, God choose you anyway when you could never have chosen him.

Listen to me. If you reject this truth, then the alternative is that God chose you because there was something in you that set you apart from others he did not choose, or worse, that you chose him before he chose you. Said another way, if you reject election you are still left with these three things which are true: God wants all saved. God could save all. God does not save all.

Okay, so you reject election but you still have to deal with the question of why you are saved and others are not saved? What's the holdup? Did they have less faith than you? Were they not as smart as you, unable to figure it out like you did? Is their sin greater than your sin? Were they less humble, less virtuous? Whatever your answer, you end up saying that there was something in you that set you apart, and suddenly you are back to salvation by works, which contradicts salvation by grace, which is the beating heart of the Christian gospel. As commentator Tim Keller puts it, "The doctrine of election is necessary to preserve the doctrine of justification."[12] To reject election is to reject grace, believing that salvation is not ours by God's gracious choice alone, but because there was something in us that made it possible.

Okay, so if double-predestination is not the answer, and rejecting election is not the answer, what is the answer? How can God blame us for anything if he's in charge of everything? In spite of God's desire for all to be saved, why are some not saved? Don't tell us, Jeff, that you're going to make us wait another week for the answer!

I'm not, though I can't guarantee the answer I give will fully satisfy. Still, let's look at Paul's answer, starting in verse 20. **"But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?"** Paul uses the ancient metaphor of a potter and his clay to make his point. Everybody in his day would certainly have been familiar with the village potter. They also would have remembered how the prophet Isaiah used this metaphor in the Old Testament. Here's the point: What possible right does a lump of clay have to complain to the potter about how

[10] Matthew 7:7

[11] I'm borrowing language here from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this verse in *The Message.*

[12] Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 209. Tim Keller has been enormously helpful to me in understanding and articulating these things.

he is shaping the clay? As Isaiah puts it, **"Can the pot say to the potter, 'You know nothing.'"**[13]

To be clear, Paul isn't censuring us from asking sincerely perplexing questions of God.[14] The Psalms alone are full of such questions! Instead, Paul is speaking here to those of us with spirits of rebellion who want to argue with God about his truths in scripture because we don't like those truths. This covers what we have already covered, that God is sovereign and none of us deserve salvation. Who are we to complain or question God if he chooses some and not others?

And yet, we also know that God desires all to be saved, that God loves all his creation and creates nobody just for the purpose of condemnation. We know that at the very heart of God, as seen most clearly in his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, is a never-ending, self-giving, other-centered, unconditional love for all people. So why are not all saved in the end?

Paul uses Pharaoh as the perfect illustration to answer this question. We are told many times in Exodus that God hardened Pharaoh's heart to fulfill his plans. He tells Moses, **"I will harden [Pharaoh's] heart so that he will not let the people go."**[15] But – and here's where we get at the answer – we are also told at just as many other places in Exodus that Pharaoh *hardened his own heart.* Exodus 8:15 is a great example: **"But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said."**[16] In fact, at one point God tells Pharaoh that he is being punished *because* Pharaoh has hardened his own heart.[17] You see, Pharaoh had a rock-hard heart long before God even sent Moses. Remember? He's slaughtering innocent babies and inflicting brutal slavery on innocent people long before we are told God hardened his heart!

You see, in the end God gave Pharaoh over to the hardness in his heart that was already there. Pharaoh chose to resist God and God honored his choice. Yes, God hardens the hearts of some to refuse salvation, but only hardens the hearts of those who want to be hardened. Commentator Leon Morris puts it this way, "Neither here nor anywhere else is God said to harden anyone who has not first hardened himself."[18] As Paul puts it in Romans 1, as he speaks regarding those who receive God's condemnation, "**God *gave them over* in the sinful desires of their hearts…"**[19]

To put this truth simply: **IF ANYBODY IS LOST THE BLAME IS THEIRS. IF ANYBODY IS SAVED THE CREDIT IS GOD'S.** Any person who ends up ultimately in hell is there because that person persisted their whole life in choosing that destiny.[20] Though his argument is a bit hard to follow, this is what Paul is saying in verses 22-24. It's subtle, but notice that God says that the objects of his glory, those he chooses, **"he prepared in advance for glory."** But the objects of wrath, they are "**prepared for destruction."** Paul is very careful in his language. God does not prepare those who are ultimately condemned. So who prepares them? They prepare themselves. But even so, Paul points out that God bears with them with "great patience!" If you know the story, think how patient God was with hard-hearted Pharaoh! He sent 10 plagues as 10 wake-up calls before his wrath was ultimately revealed. And somehow in all this, both through the objects of mercy God prepares, and the objects of wrath that prepare themselves, God's glory is revealed. Though we don't have time to go through them, this is exactly the point of the Old Testament illustrations Paul gives in verses 25-29. God has always been a God who blesses those who don't deserve it and could never have expected it, and ultimately rejects those who have persisted to believe that because of something in themselves they were entitled to his favor.

American pastor D. James Kennedy offers this helpful illustration. Imagine you have five friends who are planning to rob a bank. You find out about the plan and plead with them to not go through with it. They ignore you. In fact, they push you out of the way and head towards the bank. But you go after them and tackle one of them and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead and rob the bank, killing a guard in the process. They are all eventually captured, convicted, and condemned to life in prison. But the one man you tackled remains free. Here's the question: Whose fault was it that the other men were condemned? And what about the guy who stayed out of prison? Can he walk around and boast, "Because my heart is so good, I'm a free man."? No! The only reason he is free is because of you, because you restrained him. So those who are condemned have no one to blame but themselves, and the one who remains free has no one to credit but you.[21] It's not a perfect illustration, but I hope it's helpful.

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[13] Isaiah 29:16. See also Isaiah 45:9.

[14] John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 270. As he puts it, "Paul is trying to silence the God-defying rebel, not the bewildered seeker after truth." Also, review Job 38-41 to see how God responds to Job after he, at first, plays the God-defying rebel.

[15] Exodus 4:21. See also Exodus 7:3, 9:12, 10:1,20,27.

[16] See also Exodus 8:19,32 and 9:7,17,34.

[17] See Exodus 9:13-18

[18] Cited by Stott, 269.

[19] Romans 1:24. Paul uses this language (i.e. "God gave them over…") several times in this passage. Emphasis mine.

[20] Paraphrasing C.S. Lewis who famously said, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened." *The Great Divorce* (Collier Books, 1946), 72-73.

[21] Cited by Keller, 68-69.

God chooses us. That should be clear. But we must also choose God. We are lumps of clay, yes, but we are not mindless lumps of clay. We are made in God's image, and though that image is severely tarnished by our sin, we are still rational, responsible, moral beings, able to converse and relate to God and explore and consider his revelation, to respond in faith and free will.[22] And though the Lord loves each of us and desires each of us to be saved, and will exercise incomparable patience with us in our rebellion, if we persist in rejecting his grace permanently, then he will allow us ultimately to get what we choose, which is to have nothing to do with him. That's one way to define hell, existence cut off from God and his life. As Dallas Willard once put it, "God will let everyone into heaven who, in his considered opinion, can stand it." The point is, because heaven is an environment inescapably saturated with God's presence and glory, there are many people who will ultimately determine that heaven is the last place they will ever want to end up. You know, if you spend your entire life on earth running away from Jesus, why would you die and suddenly want to spend an eternity in a place where he is the absolute center of everything? You wouldn't!

Here's the paradox. *Salvation is always God's choice. Salvation is also always our choice.* How do we make these two seemingly contradictory truths fit together in our minds? It's hard, if not impossible. But, I hope you can see the many problems caused if we set one aside. If salvation isn't always God's choice, than that means there is something in us that has merited salvation, and grace evaporates. But if salvation isn't our choice, then were is free will? Does God force people to be with him who never want to be with him, or damn people to hell who do want to be with him? That doesn't match with the heart of God we know in Christ. So we are left then with two seemingly contradictory truths we just can't make harmonize in our minds.

Do God choose us? Do we choose God? The answer is yes.

Charles Simeon was an English preacher who lived a few hundred years ago when the debate about these issues was heated, even bitter. At that time he cautioned his congregation that they must always look to scripture for the truth in these matters. He saw both these truths articulated clearly in the Bible, just as I have tried to articulate them today. In the end, however, he could not make them fit together in any logical way in his mind. Still, he believed they were both true, and in defense of that belief he offered this illustration, which was relevant to his listeners in the middle of the Industrial Revolution. He wrote,

> As wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet subserve a common end, so may truths apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each other, and equally subserve the purposes of God in the accomplishment of man's salvation.[23]

Let me just say that I do not believe you or I will ever resolve this tension in our lifetime. It's too deep. We'll have better luck with Batman and the Joker. But as I said last week, these sorts of paradoxes are all throughout the Christian faith, reminding us that infinite truth will not always fit nicely into our finite minds. That's humbling, as it should be. God has his reasons for these things though we may never, in this lifetime, understand those reasons. But with this in mind, let me offer three very brief takeaways for you to consider.

First, all this leaves no room for any boasting whatsoever. If God chose you to be saved by grace in Christ, it is not because he found you a more worthy choice than others. There is nothing in you that has merited your salvation, so you dare not look at others with any sense of superiority or self-righteous pride. We are humbled that God would choose us. I for one find unshakable peace in the fact that God's choice of me wasn't based on my own goodness, merit, or effort. That means I don't have to wonder if God will change his mind when I fall short. That's not what his choice was based on in the first place!

Second, since we don't know who God chooses, let's never concern ourselves with trying to make that determination about anybody else. That's never your job. Or mine! Instead, we can give our lives to loving *everybody*, sharing the gospel with *everybody*, praying for the salvation of *everybody*. Paul says as much in 2nd Timothy 2:10 when he writes, **"Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory."** He acknowledges the reality of election. But since he doesn't know who the elect are, he will endure everything for all people, preaching, praying, loving, laboring for the gospel any chance he gets. God chooses to save the elect, but uses us as the instruments of that salvation. It's not up to us to save, but God still uses us as his instruments of salvation. What a sacred privilege!

Finally, in all these things we trust God. We hold on to truths that God is sovereign, that God elects to save those who deserve no such thing, that God wants all to be saved, but that somehow our choice also matters in the end. We can't make all these things fit together in

[22] Stott, 271.

[23] Cited by Stott, 278.

our minds, but we nonetheless trust that though eternal and infinite truth cannot be grasped by us, it does fit into the mind of God, and that in the end we will find that all these things will ultimately lead to his glory. Some day we will see God's mercy and grace for what they truly are. Here's what I believe. I do not believe that on that day we will find ourselves underwhelmed. In other words, I don't think any of us will have overestimated just how gracious, just how merciful, just how loving the Lord will be, and has always been.

Amen.

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The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Romans 9:1-29, including the verses from last week to get the whole context.

2. Take time to go through, one at a time, these eight truths which were presented. At each truth ask whether or not you believe this a faithful summary of biblical truth. Other scriptures are provided if you want to explore in more depth.

   #1 - The Lord is sovereign in all things. (Ephesians 1:1, Proverbs 21:1, Psalm 103:19, Job 42:2, Isaiah 46:9-10, Romans 8:28, Colossians 1:16-17)

   #2 - We all deserve God's condemnation and we cannot save ourselves. (Romans 3:19-23, Romans 6:23, John 3:18)

   #3 - In his sovereignty, the Lord chooses some who are undeserving to be saved anyway by grace. (Romans 3:10-11, Romans 8:7, John 6:44, Ephesians 1:4-5, Romans 8:29-30, 2nd Timothy 1:9, John 15:16)

   #4 - If God chooses even one person to be saved, that makes God, by definition, merciful. (Romans 9:15-16, Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:4-5)

   #5 - God's desire is that all would be saved. (Jeremiah 29:13, 2nd Peter 3:9, Matthew 7:7, 1st Timothy 2:3-4, Ezekiel 18:23)

   #6 - God did not create sinful human beings just so that he can punish them. (Genesis 1:31, Ecclesiastes 7:29, Ezekiel 33:11)

   #7 - To reject election is to reject grace. (Ephesians 2:8-9, 2nd Timothy 1:9, John 15:16)

   #8 - If anybody is lost, the blame is theirs. If anybody is saved, the credit is God's. (Romans 1:18-32, John 3:16-18, Romans 10:21, Matthew 23:37)

3. In what way are these truths dependent on one another?

4. Give your reaction to the three takeaways given at the end of the sermon:

   - The doctrine of election leaves no room for boasting.

   - Since we don't know who God chooses, we are called to love everyone and share the gospel with everyone.

   - In all things we trust God, and specifically trust that is more gracious and loving than we can now imagine.

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Why does God give us the choice to trust him or not to trust him? If God can do anything, why doesn't he just make everybody trust him and love him?