



Lesson 15

Paul's Teaching On Election Romans 9

"So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires."
Romans 9.18

What This Chapter Is Not Teaching...

Most times when we think of "election" our minds turn to John Calvin and his doctrine of Unconditional Election. While much needs to be said regarding Calvin's theology, a short primer at this point will suffice. All of Calvin's theological teachings were based on two erroneous precepts:

1. The sovereignty of God. While the Scriptures certainly maintain that God is absolutely sovereign, Calvin took it a step further. For Calvin God's sovereignty meant He must be responsible for all things, both good and evil. As one Calvinist says, "Nothing in this world happens by chance. God is in back of everything. He decides and causes all things to happen that do happen. He is not sitting on the sidelines wondering and perhaps fearing what is going to happen next. No, He has foreordained everything 'after the counsel of his will' (Eph. 1.11): the moving of a finger, the beating of a heart, the laughter of a girl, the mistake of a typist - even sin." (Palmer, Edwin H. *The Five Points of Calvinism*. P. 25)
2. The total depravity of man. "Total depravity means that natural man is never able to do any good that is fundamentally pleasing to God, and, in fact, does evil all the time." (Palmer 13). Our minds might go to Paul's words in Romans 7.21-24, but Calvin would take this a step further saying that man could not even believe on his own, thus the necessity of "Irresistible Grace" and a direct operation of the Holy Spirit on a person so that he might believe. These two preconceptions are the basis for Calvinism, including the doctrine of Unconditional Election. After all, if God is sovereign then He MUST choose who will be saved and who will be lost, and if man is totally depraved he cannot do anything to be saved. Everything must be done by God, man is totally depraved.

Chapter 9 is one of the main texts Calvinists use to prove their doctrine of Unconditional Election. They would say the following:

1. God chose Isaac instead of Ishmael and Jacob instead of Esau. (vss. 6-13) This proves that God elects some to salvation and others to condemnation. After all, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."
2. God has mercy on whom He desires and hardens whom He desires (vss. 14-18). Moses serves as an example of one who received God's mercy, Pharaoh as one who was hardened by God.
3. Man has no right to question God (vss. 19-22). He is sovereign, He is the potter. We are but the clay and have no right to question God's fairness in electing some to be vessels of mercy and some as vessels of wrath.

Before we move on to what Paul actually says in Romans 9, let's briefly show why Calvin's concept of election is rubbish.

1. It completely ignores the Jew/Gentile context of Romans. (vss. 30-31) Paul was not addressing how specific individuals were elected to salvation, but of how GROUPS were chosen to salvation. This discussion was necessary because so many of Paul's Jewish kinsmen (God's chosen people) had rejected Christ while the Gentiles were obeying the gospel.
 2. It ignores the condition that is clearly laid out in the text: faith. The Gentiles were being accepted because they pursued the righteousness that is by faith, while the Jews did not pursue righteousness by faith, but by works of the Law (vss. 30-33)
- Election is an important concept, but unfortunately false teaching has corrupted the thinking of many. God had elected that Israel be saved (vs. 6). It was necessary to explain why so many of national Israel were not saved and how the Gentiles could be part of the true Israel.
-

What This Chapter Is Teaching

- 1. Paul had great sorrow for Israel. (Vss. 1-5)** They were God's chosen people, the people who had been adopted by Him, received His covenant, etc. Yet, they had rejected Christ.
 - Of particular importance is the final blessing of Israel: "from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever." This was the purpose for which Israel was chosen, even as God had told Abraham that "in you all families of the earth will be blessed," (Gen. 12.3).
 - The Jews viewed themselves as God's chosen people and with reason since God had chosen them (Exodus 19.4-6). However, they had missed the point of His election, that it was through them the Christ came. So, in rejecting Christ the chosen people had become lost.
 - This opening paragraph is of the utmost importance, because everything that Paul says afterwards is his answering Jewish objections to how God's chosen people could find themselves in an unsaved condition.
- 2. Not all physical descendants of Israel are Israel (Vss. 6-13)**
 - Recall that the true Jew was defined in Romans 2.28-29. Paul's point in this passage is that simply being of physical descent from Israel, from Abraham, did not qualify one to be part of the Spiritual Israel. Not all from physical Israel were part of spiritual Israel.
 - To bolster his point Paul appeals to the history of the Jewish nation. Ishmael was Abraham's first son, but Abraham's heir was the son of Promise: Isaac. Likewise, Rebekah gave birth to two sons, but God chose Jacob instead of Esau. Paul's point is that just as God had the right to choose who would comprise the promised nation, He now has the right to choose who is a part of the spiritual nation.
 - A note about vs. 13. The quotation is from Malachi 1.2-3 and was spoken ~1500 years after Jacob and Esau were alive. The quotation referenced the two nations that descended from Jacob and Esau: Israel and Edom. God's "hatred" of Edom was due to their actions, God's "love" of Israel was due to their standing as His chosen nation, the nation from whom the Messiah would come. This passage is NOT referencing God choosing Jacob to salvation and Esau to condemnation, as a Calvinist would assert.
- 3. God is not unjust in how He chooses those to serve Him (Vss. 14-18)**

- How could God choose Israel to serve Him (by bringing the Christ into the world), but not save them? That seems to be the objection that Paul is addressing in this section, again using examples out of Israel's past to bolster his argument.
- The first example is a quotation from Exodus 33.19. This was part of the pronouncement God had made to Moses as He passed by, but the overall context is of God's mercy to Israel, His people who had just made the golden calf in Exodus 32. God could have justly destroyed Israel, but He was merciful to them. Paul's point in using this quote is to show Israel that God had mercy on the undeserving when it served His purpose.
- The second example is that of Pharaoh. God used Pharaoh as the means by which He would demonstrate His power. While He extended mercy to Israel in order to accomplish His purpose, He hardened Pharaoh. Pharaoh was not saved, but he was used to fulfill the purposes of God. It would be a striking point to the Jews, but if God could use Pharaoh and not be saved, so could Israel! (Note, the Scriptures attributed Pharaoh's hardened heart to God and to Pharaoh, Exodus 8.15,32. As Robert Turner rightly observed, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart by demanding something his stubborn heart did not want to do.")
- This passage does not consider the salvation of individuals, but God's right and ability to use whomever He chooses and to extend mercy. Israel received mercy even though they did not deserve it. Pharaoh was hardened and it was deserved. Israel, God's chosen people, could not call God unjust for using them in His service but not saving them when they rejected the Christ.

4. God had used Israel to bring about the salvation of both Jew and Gentile (vss. 19-29)

- You can imagine Paul's Jewish objector asking, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" If God uses people in His service in whatever way He chooses (as He did with Pharaoh and with Israel), why would God find fault with those vessels of service?
- Vss. 20-21 are verses quickly recited by a Calvinist whenever the question comes as to why God would elect some, but not others. Doesn't that make God unfair? Their response is that we (the clay) have no right to question the potter. While Paul uses those words, he does not apply them to the idea of unconditional election. Rather they are used in reference to how God used Israel to bring about His will.
- Vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath are mentioned in vss. 22-23. Again, a Calvinist would apply this to individuals: vessels of mercy being those whom God elected to salvation, vessels of wrath being those condemned to Hell. But, allow Paul to define them and we see that Paul is not considering individuals, but groups. The vessels of mercy are clearly defined in vs. 24 as those who were called from among the Jews AND the Gentiles. Paul's quotation of OT prophets to show that the Gentiles were to be incorporated bolsters the point that the Gentiles were always a part of God's plan to salvation. So, the vessels of mercy are not individuals that God chose, but the fact that God's chosen people would be from among the Jews and the Gentiles. So, it seems evident that the vessels of wrath under consideration were the Jews, the very kinsmen that Paul lamented in vss. 1-5. God relented from destroying these vessels of wrath, knowing that through their service the vessels of mercy would come about. But since Israel had by-in-large rejected the Christ only a remnant would be saved (vss. 27-29)

5. Spiritual Israel pursues righteousness by faith (vss. 30-33).

- Recall Paul's point in vs. 6, not all members of physical Israel are members of spiritual Israel. This passage shows why: Israel had pursued righteousness by works (reliance on OT covenant, Moses, circumcision, etc.) Spiritual Israel comprised of Jews and Gentiles pursued righteousness by faith in Christ.
- Paul will go on to show how Israel could have faith in chapter 10, but for now he has answered the charge of his Jewish objectors. Israel, God's chosen nation, had served the purpose of God by bringing about the Christ. They had served God's purpose in spite of the fact that Israel had been a wicked people deserving of destruction. Now, Christ has come. If they would have faith in Him they would be saved, if they did not then they had stumbled over the stone even as Isaiah had prophesied.
- Thus, Paul's doctrine of election in this passage has nothing to do with God choosing which individuals would be saved, but how God could choose Israel to serve Him, yet not save them. They could be saved, but only if they would have faith in Christ.