

Just a Quarter-Pounder with Cheese

Chosen...Before Time Began – Part V

Romans 9:19-23

Introduction

A comedian, cited in *Christianity Today International*, asked, “Do you ever wonder why?”

- Why is it you can tell a man there are four hundred billion stars and he will believe you, but tell him a bench has wet paint on it and he has to touch it before he will believe it?
- Why is it called a hamburger when it is made out of beef?
- Why do you put suits in garment bags and put garments in suitcases?
- Who do banks charge you a non-sufficient funds fee on money they already know you do not have?
- Why, if man evolved from monkeys and apes, do we still have monkeys and apes?
- Why do you drive on a parkway and park on the driveway?
- If the black box flight recorder is never damaged during a plane crash, why isn't the whole airplane made out of the same stuff?
- Here is a good question – why do they lock gas station bathrooms? Are they afraid somebody is going to sneak in there and clean them?
- One more question – if Wal-Mart is continually lowering their prices, why isn't everything free by now?

Why? This is probably the most asked and least answered question in the English language.

This comedian goes on to say, at human birth, the brain is so small and slight that it weighs, on average, fourteen ounces. It usually reaches its maximum size at age fifteen, irrefutably proving the size of the brain has nothing to do with intelligence. At its maximum size, the brain weighs an average of forty-six ounces, slightly less than three pounds. There is a theory that we only use about ten percent of our brain capacity. If that is true and we started out with two pounds plus, that means we are doing our thinking with something that weighs around the same as a quarter-pounder with cheese. And we think that with our quarter-pounder with cheese, we are going to comprehend the infinite, decipher the mysteries of God's will, and answer all our questions? Hardly.ⁱ

We have been swimming in the deep theological waters of God's sovereignty – specifically as it relates to divine election.

It might encourage you to know that John Knox, the Scottish reformer, remarked several centuries ago, that no theologian is ever more than eighty percent correct. That means, any theologian, at best, is scoring a C+.

Could we do better than that – with our forty-eight ounces of brain?

St. Augustine said, “It is God we are studying, and we do not understand Him; for if we could [fully] understand Him, He would not be God.”ⁱⁱ

Today, let us apply our quarter-pounder with cheese in order to discern, maybe as much as eighty percent of what Paul is teaching us about this attribute of God that we call sovereignty in respect to

election. I do not know about you, but I want to do better than a C+.

Review

In Romans, chapter 9, verses 14 through 18, we read some of the most difficult verses in all of the New Testament. For example, verses 17 and 18 tell us,

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

This is deep truth.

Do you remember Jonathan Edward’s definition of the sovereignty of God? It is, “God’s absolute, independent right of disposing of all creatures according to His own pleasure.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words:

- God can choose to save some and condemn others;
- God can show mercy to some and judgment to others;
- God can raise up those whose sin glorifies His justice and He can raise up those whose salvation glorifies His grace.

In our last study, Paul began to answer objections to God’s sovereignty in election. He began in verse 14, by asking,

. . . There is no injustice with God, is there? .

..

In other words, “You’re not suggesting that God is unfair, are you?”

Paul anticipated the human response to the doctrine of election to be, “God isn’t fair!” And he answers by saying, in effect, that mankind is already sinful; that God does not have to do anything for mankind to be judged, they are already condemned.

Does God make unbelievers disbelieve in Him? No, He does not have to do that. The unbelieving world already disbelieves all by themselves.

God has to do nothing for the unbeliever to disbelieve. But God does have to intervene for someone to believe.

That is the reason this doctrine of election:

- utterly eliminates pride before God;
- entirely elevates our perspective of God;

- completely encourages true worship of God;
- totally energizes our service for God;
- wonderfully exalts the mercy and grace of God.

Everyone is under condemnation; everyone is a sinner; everyone represses the truth about God; no one seeks after God; no one desires to please God – that is the condition of depraved humanity.

Divine election is the doctrine that magnifies the glory of God choosing those upon whom He will show mercy and grace.

Response to the Doctrine of Election

Now Paul anticipates another objection to the doctrine of election. Look at verse 19.

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”

In other words, “If God has chosen the elect according to His own will, before man’s will ever cooperated; if it is God’s will which moves man’s will to believe in Him, then why does God hold the unbeliever accountable, since he didn’t really have a chance?”

By the way, these questions that Paul is raising irrefutably proves that Paul is teaching Divine election; Sovereign election; the right of God to dispose of His creatures according to His pleasure.

There are many who believe that God simply looks down the corridor of history and sees who will believe in Him and then predestines them. He simply elects those who will choose Him. He calls those that He knows will call upon Him. God’s foreknowledge has no connection to intention and purpose.

If that is true, then Paul would never need to deal with these objections, right? “God is unfair! Man doesn’t have a chance!” Without divine election, most of Romans, chapter 9, is unnecessary. If man simply chooses God, God would never be accused of being unfair, right?

If God simply predestined those whom He knew ahead of time would believe, then no one would ever complain that they could not resist the will of God or that they never had a chance because God’s will did not include their election.

However, the fact that Paul’s readers are complaining that God is unfair and, in verse 19, that mankind does not have a chance is proof that Paul views God as entirely sovereign in election.

God's sovereignty seems perfectly fair to the human mind, if the human mind is sovereign. If the human mind chooses God first, rather than last; if the human mind determines eternal destiny, then God seems fair.

By the way, the word "fair" relates to justice. And you never want to ask God for justice; you ask God for mercy.

When I am pulled over by that police officer, speaking hypothetically for the sake of illustration, I do not say, "Sir, whatever you do, give me justice."

You never ask God for justice; you ask Him for mercy.

Why does God find fault with the unbeliever when He elects?

Well, what about this question in verse 19?

... Why does He still find fault? ...

Let me paraphrase the objection Paul anticipates from his readers. He is saying, "Since the unbeliever doesn't have a chance to believe; since the will of God has not chosen to grant him the gift of faith whereby he can believe, how can God then hold the unbeliever accountable?"

That is a great question. And I want to give a warning, for the second study in a row, you are going to struggle with Paul's response. It is not going to sit well with our quarter-pounder and cheese. We would never come up with this answer, which is further proof of divine inspiration.

Paul delivers a rebuke with three brief statements. Let me give them to you.

Who are you to challenge God?

1. First Paul asks, "Who are you to challenge God?"

Notice verse 20a.

... who are you, O man, who answers back to God? ...

Paul is saying, in effect, that this objection rises out of the rebellion of the human heart against the sovereignty of God.^{iv}

"The truth is, we want the last word [and we start exercising that pagan, self-centered attitude very early in life.] We want the final word. We think we have the right to challenge God!"^v

I have had a few people over the years, actually say to me, "When I see God, I'm gonna tell Him a thing or two."

Paul would say, "Who do you think you are? Who are you to challenge God? Who are you to talk back to sovereign God?"

Have you ever raised children? If so, then you know what talking back means. I was in the grocery store this past week – which is a great exercise in the discovery of human nature. Just go into the store and keep your eyes open – there is no telling what you will see.

I was in one line, and in the line next to me was a man and his three or four year old daughter. Her daddy weighed around two hundred fifty pounds, yet I knew in a matter of moments who the real heavyweight was. She was sitting in the buggy seat, and from there she ruled the universe.

He told her to put something down. She put her face up close to his, tilted her head, looked him in the eye, and said, "No."

He just kind of shook his head and ignored her response, but she was not finished with him. She reached up and put her hands on his cheeks, so that he faced her, and she said, "No."

I was ready to help out. All he had to do was tag me and I would have jumped into the ring and bailed him out. I was leaning over the rope, ready to help him.

I know what it is like, I have a little girl too. He was not going to make it out of the store alive. He didn't. The ambulance came and took him away – she drove.

Human nature asserts its sovereignty early in life – we choose; we decide. We even go so far as to talk back to God.

Paul is saying, "How dare you, little man, talk back to great and sovereign God."

God is the One who has the last word. In fact, in regards to election, He has the first word, for that matter.

Who are you to question the Creator?

2. Secondly, Paul basically says, "Who are you to question the Creator?"

Look at the middle part of verse 20.

... The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this . . . ?"

In other words, the creature is now going to speak to the Creator and question His choice on what He has made of His creatures.

This presumes the unbeliever, primarily, has the right to question the authority of God over their eternal destiny.

The opposite is true. Paul has already declared in Romans, chapter 3, verse 19b,

. . . that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God

God does not answer to you – you answer to God.

Jonathan Edwards, whom I have already mentioned, and who authored the sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, also wrote a sermon entitled, *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*.

You probably will not see this sermon in the Christian bookstores, next to *The Disciples Plan for Dieting and Deliverance*. *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners* is not going to be a best seller. It just cannot compete with the latest dieting plan that someone got by torturing the Old Testament.

Jonathan Edwards challenged the world of unbelievers in his generation, who, as in every generation, tend to join the church. In this sermon, his first point was this: “If God should forever cast you off, it would be exactly agreeable to your treatment of Him.”

In other words, Edwards was saying, “Don’t ever worry that God won’t be just toward you, you will get what you deserve.”

Edwards preached,

You do not think often of God. In fact, you think of Him hardly at all, except to blame Him when things do not go exactly as you would like. You do not want to be with God. You do not go to church often or spend much time in prayer or Bible study. You have slighted God in thousands of ways throughout your entire life. Everything you are and have comes from God, but you have not been thankful for it. You have refused to hear God’s call; you have heard the gospel preached. You have read the Good News. You possess a Bible. Has God never spoken to you? Have you never felt your heart moved, your will challenged by these truths? Some in some parts of the world have not received these calls, but you have received them again

and again, and still you turn a deaf ear in God’s direction. You will not hear Him. Why then should He hear you, even if you should cry out to Him in desperation at the last day? Is God obliged to seek your welfare, when you yourself will not seek it and, in fact, actually pursue your own destruction willingly?”^{vi}

In other words, you cannot ask God, “Why did You make me this way?” when you have embraced your unbelief and sin.

By the way, this verse offers a strong rebuke to the believer who may be asking God different questions, but with the same attitude. For example:

- Why did You make me with these weaknesses and these strengths?
- Why did You give me this husband or this wife?
- Why did You not give me a husband or wife?
- Why did You give me these children?
- Why did You not give me children?
- Why did You give me my parents; this family?
- Why was I born in this city; this state; this country?
- Why did You place me here, now?
- Why did You give me this personality and not another?
- Why did You make me to carry these diseases?
- Why did You give me these spiritual gift and not others?
- Why did You place me in this generation and this culture with these conditions?

Will the thing molded say to the molder,

. . . Why did you make me like this . . . ?

Paul’s answer to the objection contains more of a rebuke than an answer. First he responds, “Who are you to challenge God?” Secondly he responds, “Who are you to question the Creator?”

Who are you to direct the Potter?

3. Thirdly, Paul responds, “Who are you to direct the Potter?”

Notice verse 21.

Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel

for honorable use and another for common use?

In other words, “Doesn’t the potter have the authority of will and power and decision over the clay? Does he confer with the clay? Does he say to the clay, ‘What would you direct me to make? Instruct my hands!’?”

This implies authority residing in the clay, rather than in the Potter.

The reason the human heart does not like this analogy is that we do not consider ourselves common, shapeless mud. We consider ourselves better than that! We are more intelligent than that! We are at least a quarter pound of beef and cheese! We are not some lump of wet mud!

Ladies and gentlemen, this analogy simply validates the huge gap between the mind of clay and the mind of the divine Potter.

Paul’s question concerning the doctrine of election

Now, in verses 22 and 23, Paul asks his own question.

What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,

Again, Paul turns our thinking upside down. The world tends to think of sin as being some mistake that God allows to happen, and if He only had more power, He would stop all the evil in the world.

However, Paul says that sin and sinful humanity actually give God an opportunity to reveal His glory. Even God’s anger, vengeance, and retribution poured out on sinners will be worthy of our worship, for His holiness will be displayed. We will say with satisfaction, “God is just and justice was served.”

Just think of the closing chapters of the end of human history as we know it; God’s wrath. The plagues and fiery judgment; the curses of the apocalypse destroying billions of the world’s population. Then Christ returns, carrying a sword and riding on His white horse. His power, originally displayed in creation, will be equally glorious in destruction. It will be awesome as His vengeful, righteous and justified conquest of all His enemies takes place.^{vii}

Paul says, in verse 22, that the glory of God will be seen in His holy wrath and in His awful power to destroy. And what does that reveal? Paul adds, in verse 23, that it simply highlights,

. . . the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory

The primary purpose of salvation is not the benefit it brings to those who are saved, but rather the honor it brings to the God who saves them. Believers are saved without any merit or work of their own, in order that God may have a means of displaying His mercy and glory and grace.^{viii}

If you hand Him your baptism, you take from His glory. If you hand Him your good works, you take from His glory. If you hand Him anything, it is offensive to the sufficiency of the mercy of God who redeems you *all by Himself!* He does not share His redemptive glory.

By the way, you need to know something that the English language will not point out. Paul contrasts the vessels of wrath with the vessels of mercy. If you look at the last line of verse 22, Paul writes,

. . . vessels of wrath prepared for destruction

That does not mean God is preparing people for hell. That means people are preparing themselves for hell. In fact, the Greek verb translated “prepared” uses the middle voice, so it could be translated, “the vessels of wrath prepare themselves for destruction”.

In other words, God does not make sinful men for hell. God simply leaves them in their sin, which they willingly embrace and prepare themselves for destruction. Or, they prepare themselves for “ruin.” The perfect tense indicates that this ruin is a perpetual state, not some event. They are held in a perpetual state of ruin.

However, notice the end of verse 23.

. . . vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory

The vessel of mercy cannot prepare itself for heaven – God must do that!

Paul is saying that if you are going to hell, you are doing that all by *yourself*. But, if you are going to heaven, God is doing that all by *Himself*.

Either way, the judgment of the unbelieving world, the devil, and his angels will reveal the power and glory of God; and the redemption and glorification of God’s chosen people will demonstrate the mercy and grace of God, and bring, in either case, great glory to our sovereign God.

Conclusion

Let me say a closing word to the believer – the vessel of mercy.

Story teller, Garrison Keilor recalls the childhood drama of being chosen last for the backyard baseball teams. He wrote,

The captains are down to their last grudging choices; a slow kid for catcher, someone to stick out in right field where nobody hits the ball. They choose the last ones two at a time because they hardly matter and it really makes no difference. Sometimes I would go as high as sixth choice, but usually lower. But just once I'd like Darrel to pick me first and say, "Him! I want him! The skinny kid with the glasses and the black shoes. You, c'mon!" But I have never been chosen with much enthusiasm.

I would say to that, even though it stretches my mind beyond its quarter pound strength, did you ever think about the fact that God chose you early in the game and with great enthusiasm? Paul wrote to the Ephesians, in chapter 1, verses 4 through 6,

. . . He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world . . . In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ . . . according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace . . .

He chose you early and with enthusiasm, making you a vessel of mercy for His glory!

You might ask, "How can I know I am a vessel of His mercy?"

The wonderful thing is, the clay in the Potter's hand that asks for mercy, finds mercy from the hand of the Potter. You are a vessel of mercy, proven by your request for mercy. You have come to God and said, "By the work of Christ alone, do not give me justice, please give me mercy."

As Jesus said, in John, chapter 6, verse 37,

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me,

. . .

(like that),

. . . and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.

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ⁱ John Stumbo, "God's Sovereignty: The Ultimate Question," Preaching Today, 202.

ⁱⁱ "Reflections," Christianity Today, (July 31, 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, Romans: Volume 3 (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 1095.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 1100.

^v Gib Martin, Romans: God's Word for the Biblically-Inept (Starburst Publishers, 2000), p. 135.

^{vi} Boice, p. 1103.

^{vii} John MacArthur, Romans, Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 40.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 41.