

Not for the Faint of Heart

Chosen . . . Before Time Began — Part IV

Romans 9:14-18

Introduction

I want to warn you, the text I am about to read is not for the faint of heart. Look at Romans, chapter 9, verses 14 through 18.

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

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.

Have you ever taken a swim in the ocean and realized that as those waves came in, they lifted you up until you could no longer touch the bottom? You then know the feeling that the ocean is really big and powerful and you are pretty small.

Well, if you have ever swum in the deep ocean of divinely inspired doctrine, you have also had that unmistakable feeling that comes when you realize your feet will never touch bottom. You might have that feeling today.

I have been treading water for hours in Romans, chapter 9, and I can tell you that I have yet to feel the

ocean floor. When you read a passage like this, you might be tempted to say, "This is so far over my head, I'll never go swimming out here again. I'm going to stay away from the ocean – it's too vast, too deep, too mysterious."

Just verse 18 alone, that God "has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires," sweeps you out over your head.

You might think, "Can't you just preach sermons on how to feel good and improve your family life and fix your self-image? This doctrinal stuff is way over our heads. Let's just stay away from the water."

Reasons to Study the Doctrine of Election

You might even think, "What good is it to study the doctrine of election when you can't understand it?! What reason is there to study something that raises so many questions?"

I am glad you asked. Let me give five reasons to study the doctrine of election.

The doctrine of election elevates the perspective that believers have of God

1. The doctrine of election elevates the perspective that believers have of God.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He taught them to begin with the words that are recorded in Matthew, chapter 6, verse 9a,

... Our Father who is in heaven ...

He was elevating their perspective of God the Father!

In other words, “Our Father who is seated majestically, powerfully upon His throne in the heavens, hallowed be Your name – great is Your name; holy is Your name.”

When your perspective of God is elevated, the end result is pure and passionate worship.

The doctrine of election encourages the true worship that believers offer to God

2. The doctrine of election not only elevates the perspective that believers have of God, but it also encourages the true worship that believers offer to God.

When you believe in the justice and mercy, holiness and grace of God, you are enabled to worship Him with pure worship.

The word “orthodox” is actually derived from two Greek words:

- ortho – which means correct;
- doxa – which means praise.

So, the word “orthodox” literally means, “correct praise or worship”.

We use the word “doxa” in our word “doxology” – the hymn of praise.

True worship flows out of true doctrine. When correct doctrine is taught, the result is not a nose full of water, the result is praise!

The doctrine of election eliminates the pride that believers have before God

3. The doctrine of election also eliminates the pride that believers have before God.

For one thing, this doctrine accentuates the fact that our understanding of God is so small. Secondly, it accentuates the fact that our place in the presence of God is small.

Have you ever wondered why in the Bible, when someone got a glimpse of who God was, they fell on their face or they asked God to leave?

One author wrote these provocative words,

If God were to visibly show up today, many of us think we'd run up to Him and high-five Him for the good things He has done; some of us think we'd run up and hug Him or ask Him for an answer to that nagging theological

question; others might even demand He tell us why that tragedy in our lives was permitted to rob us of our happiness and comfort. The truth is, we would do none of these things. We would, instead, all fall trembling at His feet as His awesome, mighty, and fearful glory filled the room. We would be awestruck in the presence of a holy and all-powerful God.

No doctrine fills us with such a sense of God’s awesome power and sovereignty over creation as the doctrine of election. Tragically, however, it is the most ignored doctrine of all. The result is that God becomes small and man occupies the center of life.

God more easily becomes a divine custodian who runs around fixing everything in your life – because you are sovereign and God is servant. So we are told today, by Christian leaders, teachers, and authors that God lives to eliminate your aches and pains and He exists to make your life comfortable. The Bible becomes a book of tricks whereby you learn how to manage God to your best interests.

It is no wonder that people abandon God when life hurts or when life becomes unexplainable. God was supposed to come through and He did not!

The doctrine of election reverses all this corruption in our thinking. It reverses the order so that our lives become small and God becomes the center. God becomes the Sovereign and we become the servant. He manages us; He controls our destinies.

Jonathan Edwards, who preached two hundred fifty years ago, was very instrumental, as God’s man, in bringing about the Great Awakening. That was a time of great spiritual harvest, as well as spiritual revival in the churches of his generation. He preached often on the sovereignty of God. You may be well aware of his most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”.

That will improve your self image. That will fix your marriage. It will! God happens to be angry with your self-centeredness. He sees your immorality and despises it. He knows about your stubbornness and pride and rebellion. Who God is has a way of fixing who we are.

My parents often had evening meetings as missionaries. When my brothers and I were old enough to stay home, they would leave us there to supposedly to get our homework done. When I was twelve years old, we got our first television. It was black and white and you had to use a pair of pliers to turn the channel because the knob had broken off.

Soon after getting it, my parents had an evening meeting. Before they left, my mother said those dreaded words to her four sons (the oldest was fourteen and the youngest was six), “Do not turn on the television.”

They left and we finished our homework, and then what? I do not know who suggested it – I think it was Eve, or maybe the serpent – I cannot remember, but we turned on the forbidden fruit. We watched television that night for at least two hours, until our scout, which we took turns on duty, shouted that Mom and Dad had pulled up in the driveway. We turned off the television, put the pliers where they belonged, and ran for cover.

Mom and Dad walked in and we were sitting on the couch reading our books . . . doing extra credit math problems. I will never forget – my mother asked, “Boys, have you watched television?”

We said, “No ma’am.”

Then she walked over to the television, which in those days had those large glass pipes inside that heated up, and she put her hand on the back of the television. I do not know where she learned that trick, but she nearly burned her hand.

We thought we were getting away with it, but she knew how to find out the truth. We were “sinners in the hands of an angry Mom”. That was some sermon! And that night my brothers and I experienced a great awakening.

Jonathan Edwards, who preached a similar sermon, though not as well as my mother, defined sovereignty as, “God’s absolute, independent right of disposing of all creatures according to His own pleasure.”

Let me read that again, “God’s absolute, independent right of disposing of all creatures according to His own pleasure.”¹

In other words:

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

This God is virtually unheard of today. Maybe that is one of the reasons we do not hear from Him today – in respect to spiritual revival.

The doctrine of election energizes the service that believers render to God

4. The doctrine of election eliminates pride, elevates perspective, encourages worship, and fourthly, energizes the service that believers render to God.

Paul will apply all of this doctrinal truth when he arrives at chapter 12 and begins to apply it as believers are told to offer themselves as living sacrifices to this awesome God.

The doctrine of election exalts the mercy and grace that believers receive from God

5. The doctrine of election, fifthly, exalts the mercy and grace that believers receive from God.

Paul writes in verse 18 of chapter 9,

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

As soon as we begin to think that God owes us something or that God must do something for us, we minimize His glory. Election magnifies the character and glory of God who chooses those upon whom He will show mercy and grace.

Paul’s letter to the Romans has already taught us that everyone is under condemnation; everyone is a sinner; everyone represses and suppresses the truth about God; no one seeks after God; no one desires to please God, unless God intervenes and creates spiritual life. And God intervenes – pulling from condemned humanity, this mass of unregenerate wriggling corrupt worms, some whom He will save.

We do not like that picture, do we?! That does not fit very well with, “God loves you because you’re so special.”

That is why the lyrics of Isaac Watt’s hymn were changed in our generation. Isaac Watts originally wrote,

Alas! and did my Savior bleed,

And did my Sovereign die?

Would He devote that sacred head

For such a worm as I?

For nearly three hundred years, those lyrics were sung. But, we had to change those words – we are

bad, but we are not that bad. So the lyrics in our hymnals today are,

*Would He devote that sacred head
for sinners such as I?*

It will not be long before the word “sinner” will be exchanged for “confused person who makes poor choices.” That is going to be hard to sing.

The reason the church cannot picture itself as redeemed worms is because they no longer view God as a merciful Sovereign. But, when you get a glimpse of what the doctrine of election means, you cry out, “Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Well, we need to end this introduction and get into the paragraph. We could spend weeks on this, but we are going to cover some of it and move on. I hope the study of Romans, up to chapter 12, provides a foundation so that when we arrive at chapter 12, we will understand what it means to be a living sacrifice unto God.

You might ask, “A living sacrifice? You mean Paul wants us to sacrifice our lives for God?”

When you understand that you are elect, by the mercy and grace of sovereign God, you then understand what it means for God to own everything about you. And you will offer up yourself to God as a living, ongoing sacrifice.

Old Testament Illustrations of God’s Sovereign Election

Throughout chapter 9, Paul pulls out illustrations from the Old Testament which reveal that God has always acted through sovereign election in the world.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

God chose Abraham over everyone else living in Ur (Romans 9:7). He chose Isaac over Ishmael (Romans 9:7-9). He chose Jacob over Esau (Romans 9:10-13). Sovereign choice!

Moses and the Israelites

Now, in verse 15, Paul repeats Exodus, chapter 33, verse 19, when God says to Moses,

*... I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have
compassion.*

This revelation came on the heels of three thousand Israelites being killed by the sword. Moses

had received the Ten Commandments from the Lord, and when he returned to the people, he found them involved in idolatry – dancing before a golden calf. God spoke to Moses, saying the entire nation deserved to be destroyed. Instead, however, only three thousand died in judgment. Why three thousand and not everyone? And why them? We are not told, except that Paul uses that event to illustrate God’s sovereignty in judging some, while on others, showing mercy.

Paul’s implication is interesting. He is saying, “If you are going to say that God is unrighteous because He chooses one person and not another, then God was unrighteous at Mount Sinai when He let any person live. Everybody should have died, but God said, ‘I will show mercy.’”ⁱⁱ

Egyptian Pharaoh and the Israelites

Next, Paul will pull from Israel’s past, one of the greatest illustrations of God’s sovereign power known to the Jew. He uses the demonstration of God’s power in Egypt that liberated the nation from Pharaoh.

Notice verse 17a.

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, . . .

Stop for a moment and take that in,

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, . . .

The Scriptures were not in a written, completed form at that time. However, Paul considers the word of God, spoken through Moses, to be tantamount to scripture.

You should circle the words “He says” in verse 15, referring to God speaking, and draw a line to the words “the Scripture says” in verse 17. It is clear that Paul considers the two to be equally authoritative. The terms are synonymous. In other words, when the scriptures speak, God is speaking.

So, what did God say to Pharaoh? Continue to verse 17b.

*... 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.*

One author commented,

*Being an absolute monarch, Pharaoh
assumed that everything he said and did was
by his own free choice to serve his own human
purposes. But the Lord makes clear through
Moses that Pharaoh was divinely raised up to*

*serve a divine purpose, a purpose of which the king was not even aware.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Would God do that? Is God that sovereign, that He can raise up an unbeliever to accomplish the purpose of His own will? That is exactly what Paul said.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs, chapter 16, verse 4,

The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.

Can you believe that?

Peter wrote in I Peter, chapter 2, verses 7 and 8,

. . . for those who disbelieve, . . . they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

You might say, “Well then, does God make unbelievers disbelieve in Him?”

No, He does not have to do that. The unbelieving world already disbelieves all by themselves.

Jesus said in John, chapter 3, verse 8b,

. . . he who does not believe has been judged already . . .

In other words, the unbeliever has already been judged and is already condemned.

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

What an illustration Pharaoh made of God’s power. God said through Moses, as Paul writes in verse 17b,

. . . I raised you up . . .

“Exegeiro” is the Greek word which is used to refer to the promoting of world leaders. The same word is used by the prophet Habakkuk of the bloodthirsty Chaldeans whom God raised up to do His will (Habakkuk 1:6). The prophet Zechariah also used the word when he prophesied of the antichrist whom God will raise up to devour humanity (Zechariah 11:16).

God said to Pharaoh,

. . . I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you . . .

I believe Paul is too clear to be misunderstood in this. Though it boggles our mind, God is sovereign; God is the initial chooser. It is God who raises up those who will believe and God who raises up those who will not believe. He is the primary cause; He is the original mover in salvation; He is the initiator of redemption. That doctrine puts Him on the throne and places humanity bowing at His feet!

By the way, this text is a quotation from the conversation between Moses and Pharaoh that is recorded in Exodus, chapter 9. That conversation occurred between the sixth and seventh plagues that had come into the land of Egypt.

Each plague had attacked one of Egypt’s primary gods, revealing the sovereignty of God over them all. But Pharaoh remained resolute. We know from Paul that God had hardened his heart.

Although several times in Exodus, we read that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, God had already said to Moses several chapters earlier, that He was going to harden his heart so he would not let the people go free (Exodus 4:21). And through the stubbornness of this world leader, God’s power will be unmistakably revealed.

You need to know a few things about this Pharaoh. He was Amenhotep the Second. His empire and he himself believed he was the son of God – the highest god of the universe; the sun god “Ra”. His throne name meant, “Great are the manifestations of Ra,” which is ironic, given the fact that the God of Israel will overpower all the gods with His manifestations.

Amenhotep II was renowned for his athletic ability and physical strength. While he was still young, his father put him in charge of the royal stables where he trained stallions for battle. His reputation grew even more legendary after he shot arrows through a target while driving a chariot with the reins tied around his waist. The deed was so incredible that it was recorded in several inscriptions in several different cities.

When Amenhotep II became Pharaoh, he still insisted on leading the troops into battle and fighting in hand-to-hand combat. He became a fierce dictator and would be known as the most bloodthirsty, cruel leader of the 18th Dynasty.

Once, when several cities rebelled against his kingdom, he led his army and defeated them. On the way back, he hung the seven defeated kings upside down on the prow of his ship and then, when he arrived home, hung them on the temple walls as trophies.

This is the man before whom Moses would dare insist, “Let My people go.”

“Go? You slaves are commanding me? You are resisting my sovereign control over you?”

So God, in one display of power after another, revealed his sovereignty over the sovereign of Egypt, the most powerful kingdom in that part of the world. Until the ninth demonstration, when God seemed to say to Pharaoh, “So, you are the sovereign descendant of the great sun god Ra? Well, I will blot out the sun!”

Darkness fell over the land. And Pharaoh said to Moses, “If I ever see you again, I will kill you.”

Then, the last of the plagues involved the command of God for the Israelites to put the blood of lambs on their doorposts. For without the blood, the death angel who would sweep into Egypt one night soon, and kill the firstborn of every family. God would demonstrate that He was sovereign. And that includes having the power over life and death.

The royal tomb of Amenhotep II was found around 1900 AD. He was mummified and still well preserved. His wife was also there, and another woman as well. Even though Amenhotep had several sons and daughters, only one of them seems to have been mummified and placed in that tomb with them.

One Egyptologist whose work I read, said the likeness between Amenhotep and this unidentified male was remarkable (even after thousands of years the flesh was still on their bones). It was a boy around nine or ten years of age – unusually placed beside the wife of Amenhotep. No doubt, he was her little boy – their firstborn son.

God’s power over Egypt would never be forgotten. And the Passover, when the angel of death passed over the homes that had blood displayed on the doorposts, is still observed by Jews all around the world. It is a symbol of the mercy of God toward those who were covered by the blood of the lamb.

Conclusion

You might ask, “How do you know if you’ve received the mercy of God?”

That is simple – you asked for it. God elects those who will receive His mercy – and those whom God has chosen to receive His mercy are the same people who come to God for mercy. They are the ones who have said, “Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me.”

If you have said that to your Lord and Savior, “Oh sovereign Master of all there is and all I am, I claim no right of my own, but only the shedding of Your blood for my sin, have mercy on me, have mercy on me, have mercy on me.” – then you, my friend, are one of God’s chosen, redeemed by His mercy and grace.

Alas! And did my Savior bleed,

And did my Sovereign die?

Would He devote that sacred head

For such a worm as I?

At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light,

And the burden of my heart rolled away,

It was there by faith I received my sight,

And now I am happy all the day!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/16/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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

ⁱⁱ Alva J. McClain, Romans: The Gospel of God’s Grace (Winona Lake, IN, BMH Books, 1973), p. 181.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Romans: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 33.