

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: **Exposition of Romans**

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DEFENDING GOD'S RIGHTS

Charles Spurgeon, that great preacher of the last century, tells a story of an encounter that he had with an Arminian.¹ “I recollect an Arminian brother telling me that he had read the Scriptures through a score or more times, and he could never find the doctrine of election in them. He added that he was sure he would have done so if it had been there, for he read the Word on his knees. I said to him, “I think you read the Bible in a very uncomfortable posture, and if you had read it in your easy chair, you would have been more likely to understand it.” Pray, by all means, and the more the better, but it is a piece of superstition to think there is anything in the posture in which a man puts himself for reading, and as to reading through the Bible twenty times without having found anything about the doctrine of election, the wonder is that you found anything at all: you must have galloped through it at such a rate that you were not likely to have any intelligible idea of the meaning of the Scripture.”² The ninth chapter of Romans teaches with such clarity the doctrine of God’s sovereign election (and reprobation) that many *Christians* avoid it altogether. The concept of divine election and reprobation is not well received in many Evangelical circles. Former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and well-known television preacher, the late Adrian Rogers, rejects the doctrine of unconditional (Calvinistic) election.³ The late Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, Charles Stanley and even Billy Graham are just a few of the popular figures in Evangelicalism who likewise categorically dismiss the notion of God’s sovereignty when it comes to election and reprobation. It is difficult, however, to avoid the teaching of Paul in this chapter. Paul has been pointing out in the preceding context that the failure of the present generation of Israel, due to their rejection of their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, is not an unexpected and unexampled thing. Throughout the history of Israel, there has been in operation the principle of distinguishing grace. Among the sons of Abraham, Ishmael was rejected and Isaac chosen, for the Scripture says, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” (cf. Gen. 21:12). And among the sons of Isaac a choice was made, for “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (cf. Mal. 1:2; Rom. 9:13). Thus, Israel should not be surprised to find only a remnant of believers from the nation embracing their Messiah. It is not easy for people to understand and appreciate the fact that God operates in sovereign and distinguishing grace in His dealings with them. And what complicates the matter is the fact that the minds of men have been affected by the sin of Adam, and they are unable to understand the Word of God. Further, even Christians must have their minds renewed by the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit to comprehend and appreciate the ways in which God works in the accomplishment of His purposes. In our present state of limited and warped knowledge of God, due to the effects of sin as a result of the fall of man, it is important to remember that we are like children in the things of God. He is our Father, and we are not yet ready for all of the truth of God that we may ultimately know. The apostle has just said, “As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” Knowing that the text brought forth questions and objections, Paul now turns to the discussion of them. The statement raises the question, “Is God righteous in His sovereign choice of some and rejection of others?” That is the question he seeks to answer, and he will look at it both from the Godward and manward side.

I. **IS THERE UNRIGHTEOUSNESS WITH GOD?**

- A. **The word to Moses.** (Rom. 9:14-16). Now one must remember, as we come to the question, that God is not responsible for man’s predicament. Man, due to the disobedience in the Garden of Eden, is responsible for his condition in sin, disobedience, and coming judgment. While ever since Genesis and the fall, he has sought to blame God, he has been unsuccessful in his endeavor. He is responsible for his plight. Further, it is important to remember that God *does* exercise mercy with absolute freedom. Therefore, it is not unjust for Him to do so, for God is not

unjust. In fact, whatever He does is right. To Christians, the will of God is the standard of right and wrong. His commands are the expression of His nature, and His actions are also the expression of His nature. Thus, all that He does is right. And He does elect and reprobate according to His sovereign will. Thus, it is right for Him to do so. And, if this still is difficult for us, let us remember that we are children! The apostle had often answered such objections as he himself raises here. In his ministry, he had often encountered them, for he proclaimed a sovereign electing and reprobating God. In fact, if *we* in our preaching do not have the same objections, then we are not preaching the message that he preached. The message of grace always produces objections along the lines of the one he mentions in Romans 6:1, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Preach free grace and that is what the preacher will hear from the legalistically-minded. And if we proclaim distinguishing grace, we will hear, "God is not unrighteous, is he?" And, "How, then, can He find fault, if He acts in that way?" Do we hear such objections as we preach the grace of God? *It is a good test of our preaching.* The apostles first reply is a forthright dismissal of the idea as blasphemous. "God forbid!" But, then, since his audience recognized the authority of Scripture, he turned to the Word of God for evidence of the truth of his message. He cites the words that God spoke to Moses in Exodus 33:19, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (cf. v. 15). Even though Israel had failed abysmally before Yahweh, He nevertheless acts in mercy toward them, and He acts in mercy sovereignly. Thus, the apostle concludes, "it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy" (cf. v. 16). If ever a text indicated the unscriptural nature of "free will," this one does. "It is not of him that willeth," the apostle says. As we have said so many times, the doctrine of free will, that is, that it is in the power of a man to turn to God of himself is contrary to the grace of God. Salvation becomes, then, the work of God *and* the work of man, and the purity of the grace of God is compromised. No longer can one say, "Salvation is of the Lord." It must now be, "Salvation is of the Lord *and* of me." Paul will have none of that. "It is not of him that willeth" is his word of grace. Lorraine Boettner has written, "Furthermore, if we admit free will in the sense that the absolute determination of events is placed in the hands of man, we might as well spell it with a capital F and a capital W; for then man has become like God,--a first cause, an original spring of action,--and we have as many semi-gods as we have free wills. Unless the sovereignty of God be given up, we cannot allow this independence of man."⁴ Man is unable to come to God of himself. Jesus Himself puts it as strongly as anyone in Scripture. He says, "No man can come to me, except the Father, who hath sent me, draw him" (cf. John 6:44). We are unable to make a decision of the will for God and salvation until God has first worked in our wills to make us willing. Listen once again to Spurgeon, "I have known some that, at first conversion, have not been very clear in the Gospel, who have been made evangelical by their discoveries of their own need of mercy. They could not spell the word 'grace.' They began with a G, but they very soon went on with an F, till it is spelt very like 'freewill' before they had done with it. But after they have learned their weakness, after they have fallen into serious fault, and God has restored them, or after they have passed through deep depression of mind, they have sung a new song. In the school of repentance they have learned to spell. They began to write the word 'free', but they went on from free, not to 'will' but 'grace', and there it stood in capitals, 'FREE GRACE'.... They became clearer in their divinity, and truer in faith than ever they were before."⁵ Salvation is first of His willing (cf. Jas. 1:18), and only then and secondarily of ours. Salvation must always be "of the Lord." Free will denies this, and that is why the teaching of free will is so destructive of truth. Since our inability is self-acquired by virtue of the fall, we cannot plead that we are not responsible, because we cannot come to God of ourselves. It is we who have brought ourselves to this plight.

- B. The word to Pharaoh** (Rom. 9: 17-18). Pharaoh was Moses' natural opponent, as the Exodus account shows, and it is natural for Paul to cite a text that pertained to him. God was not in the debt of Moses, much less was He in debt to Pharaoh. As the Scriptures put it, "Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth" (Exod. 9:16). "Therefore," Paul adds, "hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." The words are hard, but they indicate that God sovereignly reprobates as well as elects. And yet God was longsuffering

with the Egyptian monarch, for He could have cut him off at his first refusal to let Israel leave their captivity in Egypt. Instead He was longsuffering with Pharaoh and dealt with him by the many miracles of Moses for a lengthy period of time.

II. WHY DOES GOD STILL BLAME US?

We look now at the matter from the manward side. The apostle brings forward the common objection to his teaching, "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" (v. 19). It is a loaded question, for it implies that God is responsible for man's lost condition. We have said above, however, that that is not so. It is man who responsible for his position of sin and inability to respond to the commands of God. Paul's reply is, "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?" (v. 20). The attitude of the objector is repelled rather than refuted in detail, for the question reveals an attitude of antipathy and rebellion against God. The *creature* cannot challenge the Creator. That itself indicates that he does not understand the true relation between God and men. "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?" We are "vessels" in His hands. Actually, Paul says, the Lord has been longsuffering in His dealings with men. This He was not compelled to be. He did not have to deliver Abraham from bowing down before the moon god Nannar. Nor was He compelled to deliver other Old Testament saints from bowing down to sticks and stones. He was not required to save the thief on the cross, but could have left him in the same state of his friend who passed into eternity blaspheming the God who could save him forever. And He was not required to save and transform the murderous Pharisee by the name of Paul. But He did in His goodness exercise longsuffering patience with them and delivered them in His marvelous grace (cf. 2 Tim. 1:9). In these verses 2-23, we have a strong indication of why God determined that evil should exist in His universe. The greatest good that man may have is the knowledge of God, and the revelation of Him would be incomplete, if we did not know Him in His justice and in His mercy. But we can never know Him in these attributes, if sin does not exist in the universe. Thus, evidently God determined that sin exist in His world in order that the angels and men should know Him in His justice by His judgment of sin, and that men alone should know Him in His mercy by virtue of the saving ministry of the Lamb of God. There are vessels of wrath, who are exhibitions of His justice and wrathful power (cf. v. 22), and there are vessels of mercy, who are exhibitions of His rich glory in mercy (cf. v. 23). The ones have been "fitted to destruction," while the others have been prepared unto glory by the marvelous prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit, who has wooed and won them by effectual grace, giving them life and faith (cf. 1 John 5:1; Rom. 8: 7-8), when they were dead in trespasses and sins. The unwilling by His saving mercy have been made willing to the praise of His grace (cf. 3:11). And, further, Paul says, the riches of the glory of His grace have been manifested not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles (cf. v. 24). Both have been called and saved in His grace. Later the apostle will have more to say about the relative proportions of Gentiles and Jews in the body of the elect in the present time (cf. vv. 25-29).

III. WHAT SHALL WE SAY THEN?

- A. **The facts** (Rom. 9:30-31). The apostle has been emphasizing divine sovereignty in salvation and judgment, but now he turns to the other side of the coin and stresses human responsibility (not human free will; free will and human responsibility are different things). We must never, in our stress upon the divine sovereignty, overlook the important truth of human responsibility. We are saved by divine grace, but we are lost by reason of our sin. The apostle makes the important statement that the Gentiles have found what they were not seeking, God's righteousness (cf. v. 30) by faith. In this way he stresses that God initiated the work of salvation before they began to seek Him. Salvation always begins with God. He seeks us before we seek Him, and He has sought and saved vast numbers of Gentiles. On the other hand, Israel has not found the righteousness of God for the simple reason that in self-righteousness they had sought it by works, Paul says (cf. v. 31). In seeking to bring God into their debt by seeking justification by what they did, Israel failed to take the place of sinners hoping for mercy. And it is only in the latter place that we may expect God to save, for He must be glorified as Savior alone (cf. Eph. 2:8-9; Isa. 55:1).
- B. **The cause** (Rom. 9:32-33). The cause of Israel's failure is set forth plainly here. In the first place, they sought the righteousness of God not by faith but by obedience, by the works of the

Law. No one can be justified by the works of the Law, for we are sinners and already guilty and condemned. A payment must be made to the righteousness and justice of God, and we cannot do that, except by paying with our lives. If we are to be saved, there must be a substitute, able to take our penalty upon himself and give us life. The Stone of Israel, the Lord Jesus Christ, is our only hope. He has become our Representative and borne His people's penalty, and we go free. Israel, instead of responding to the Stone in faith, receiving His merciful provision of righteousness, stumbled at the Stone, rejecting Him, and thus has fallen under the judgment of God. Their only hope is suggested in the last clause, "whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" (v. 33).

CONCLUSION: It is easy to see our problem when the subjects of election and reprobation come before us. We are like little children and do not know our own weakness and ignorance of the wisdom of our Father. We want to have the last word with God, but it is He, the Sovereign of the universe, who controls our destiny and that of His universe. We are to listen to Him in His Word and believe His message that there is redemption only in the Lord Jesus Christ. There are many questions that the children raise against the Father for His distinguishing grace. I only mention a few common ones. It is said, "It is unjust to elect only some." Salvation, however, is not a matter of justice; it is a matter of mercy. Election does not prevent anyone from reaching heaven; that is the result of sin. Others say, "Election is inconsistent with human freedom." It is true that Paul says, "it is not of him that willeth" (cf. 9:16). True freedom is the capacity to respond in accordance with our *nature* and *being*. That we have. But, since the fall, our nature has its bias to evil, and it is to evil that we tend in our moral and spiritual decisions. In that sense we do not have free will. Free will is limited to matters of environment, habits, training, and such like. Even then we shall discover that in most matters we do not have free will. The old man cannot will to be young again. The sick cannot choose to be well. We cannot choose our parents, our place of birth, our time of birth, etc. We cannot jump off a fifty-story skyscraper and at the twenty-fifth story will to be on the top again. In these areas we see the limitation of man. When man sinned in the Garden of Eden, the will died in that fall so far as choices favorable to the will of God are concerned. Now, as Jesus says, "No man can come to me except the Father, which has sent me, draw him" (cf. John 6:44). We are in bondage to sin. That is why the Arminian construction of salvation is so wrong. Man cannot of his own "free will" decide for the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, for they that are in the flesh cannot please God. A work of divine grace must precede every decision that pleases God, for salvation is of the Lord. In fact, John Calvin has said that we shall never be persuaded of God's mercy until we know His eternal election, and "that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but GIVES TO SOME WHAT HE DENIES TO OTHERS."⁶ He goes on to say that those who "shut the gates" to the teaching "wrong men no less than God," for it is election in grace that makes us humble and glorifies God. In fact, in election is the very origin of the church, and it is our buttress when we become dismayed or cast down. It is a useful doctrine, therefore, and ought to be preached openly and fully.⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ An Arminian—a term used to identify a person who is sympathetic to the major theological features of the theology of Jacob Arminius (1559-1609). Chief among these is the foundational belief that fallen man possesses the innate ability (free-will) to activate the saving grace of God.

² C.H. Spurgeon, *A Defense of Calvinism* (rpt. Free Grace Publications, 1973), p. 4.

³ Cf. article "Calvinism Resurging Among SBC's Young Elites" in *Christianity Today* (Oct. 6, 1997), p. 87.

⁴ L. Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (P & R, 1968), p. 221.

⁵ As cited in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (The Banner of Truth, 1966), p. 69.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* trans F.L. Battles, ed. J.T. McNeill (Westminster, 1975), Bk. 3., Ch. 21., sec. 1.

⁷ The substance of this exposition was derived from notes taken from lectures on Romans 9 given by my Prof. of Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.