

# THE FREE CHOICES OF GOD: IS INEQUALITY UNJUST?

SERIES: THE MYSTERY OF THE JEWS



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Romans 9:14-29  
20th Message  
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One of the most difficult tasks I have as a parent is teaching my three daughters about grace—that all of life is to be appreciated as a gift from God. How do I best communicate that life is not earned or deserved but is free? One of the ways I have tried to inculcate this in the hearts of my children is by giving them gifts, both tangible and intangible, such as outings or special events. I want them to know that the gifts are free and undeserved.

But I have discovered that when I give one of them a gift, the others cry out, “You did not do that for me! This is not fair! This is unjust!” When I show grace to one child, the others feel they have a right to it also. They think they deserve it, too. Now as a parent, I am in their debt. When I then try to grace the other two with gifts, instead of receiving them in appreciation and delight, they express grudging acceptance. The gift is carefully scrutinized and compared to make sure they are not cheated.

You can get the same reaction when you teach the doctrine of election. John Calvin who expounded this great doctrine from Romans wrote: “When the human mind hears these things, its petulance breaks all restraint, and it discovers a serious and violent agitation as if alarmed by the sound of a martial trumpet.” This is true. In fact, the secular historian Will Durant, who has written volumes on Western Civilization, wrote of John Calvin and called predestination “a most devilish doctrine.”

This doctrine did not originate with John Calvin, however. It was first elucidated by Paul, but it really began with God himself. It was not the product of Paul’s theoretical imaginations, nor was it part of his academic training. Rather, it was born out of a heart which was broken in grief for his own people who had rejected Christ.

In the first half of Romans, Paul proclaimed that the gospel he preached was not an innovation. It was the fulfillment of all the prophetic promises and the covenants to Abraham and David. Christ was the Messiah, and with his coming came the birth of the new age, the age of the Spirit. The great paradox, even the scan-

dal, was that the Jews, the physical seed of Abraham, rejected this message.

While contemplating this, the apostle was led into the heart and mind of God. Then the great mystery of election was revealed to him by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. He was able to see how that election worked out in the history of salvation as it is worked out in the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Last week we looked at the first part of Paul’s answer to Israel’s disbelief in the beginning of chapter 9. He stated that the word of God had not failed. As he studied the Old Testament, he came to realize the true definition of Israel. He discovered that not all who were descended of Israel were Israel. Not all of the children of the flesh were children of promise. Paul saw that within Israel God had elected a spiritual nation according to promise based upon his own free choice.

Every Jew knew that he was elected, for God chose Abraham and not some other nation. Out of Abraham, he elected Isaac not Ishmael. Then he elected Jacob not Esau. But what the Jew did not understand was that after Jacob had his twelve sons the elective process continued. Being an Israelite did not necessarily mean one was a son of God. Each individual had to be born again to become a child of promise.

In Romans 9:14-29, Paul answers the objections he knows are going to be raised regarding the free choices of God. Are the free preferences of God just? He opens with the question in verse 14.

## I. ARE THE PREFERENCES OF GOD JUST? 9:14-18

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

The expression “what shall we say” is used seven times in the book of Romans. Four times, Paul uses this formula when he recognizes that a false conclusion can be deduced from what he has just said. With this phrase, he takes the opportunity to repeat and reject the false conclusion before he states the correct one.

The wrong conclusion is: Is God unjust? The charge of injustice arises from

the freedom God exhibits in choosing some but not others. When God graces some, we feel he is obligated to bless all. Therefore, he is in our debt. Paul answers this objection in verses 15 through 18. His answer has two parts. The first part is in verses 15 and 16:

**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.**

Paul’s first response is that God maintains the right as God to be merciful. Mercy is a gift, not a right. The Hebrew idea of “*mercy*” speaks of God’s unqualified favor toward someone who has neither earned or deserved it. In fact, it is used adverbially in the Old Testament to render the expression “for no reason.” The Hebrew term “*compassion*,” related to the Hebrew word referring to a woman’s womb, speaks of all the feelings a mother has toward her newborn infant. All of her life is focused on helping her helpless infant. This is a wonderful attribute of God—how easily his heart is moved to come to our aid precisely because we are helpless. But mercy and compassion are both undeserved, and we can make no claim to them. As Calvin says, “The very inequality of His grace proves that it is free.”

Jesus had a difficult time getting this point across to his disciples. Remember how much competition occurred among his twelve men. The parable that illustrates free grace most effectively is the parable of the landowner and his vineyard. When he hired people to work in his vineyard, he started some at the beginning of the day for a set price. He continued to hire others until there were only a few hours left. When time came for payment, he paid the last first and paid them the same wage as the first. This, of course, provoked the other workers. The landowner defended himself in Matthew 20:14 and 15, saying, “I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?” This is God’s prerogative. He loves to be

generous, and he is free to do whatever he wants with what is his. He maintains that right. Mercy is a gift, not our right.

Second, mercy, not works, is the key to life. Here I think Paul may be quoting Aristotle who once said, "*Victory does not go to the one who wants to win, but to the one who competes.*" Paul says this is not quite correct. Victory does not depend on the one who wishes or the one who runs, but on God who shows mercy.

I wish we could teach this to sales people. How many times has a salesman come to your door and used several motives to get you to buy his product? When you look at the product, you know you do not need it. Therefore, the motivation of usefulness is out. Catching this, the salesman takes a different approach—compassion. Perhaps, he tells you he is a college student who can earn a scholarship if he sells so many of the products. He needs your compassion. When he realizes that this will not work either, he might move to rights. You owe him compassion. This is the motivation of guilt. If you do not buy his product, you are guilty of causing his failure. If we choose to show them mercy and buy their product, our action is a gift, not an obligation.

This is what God is maintaining. His grace is undeserved and unearned. Although it is the key to life, we do not have a right to it. His mercies are free.

God also maintains the right to harden others in unbelief. Look at verses 17 and 18:

**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.**

The text tells us that God picked Pharaoh as an unwilling instrument. Even though he was disobedient, he served the purpose of God. Thus, when Moses said, "Let my people go," the Pharaoh did not agree.

Why did God harden his heart? He did this ten times so that when he delivered his people he might make his name known throughout the whole earth. Through those ten plagues in Egypt, he brought a nation to its knees, and Israel marched out in glory. Because of that, the whole world then and now has seen the glory and majesty of his salvation. In fact, when the spies met Rahab forty years later, she said, "Where have you been? We

heard about you forty years ago!" She had already heard about the Lord and had determined that he was the God of heaven and earth.

Paul says the hardening of hearts reveals God's power and is based solely on God's choice. We do not like these hard words! I am even tempted to soften them now, but the text will not let me. Basically, we do not like them because we are not in God's league. We cannot comprehend the infinite with our finite minds. I am sure you have objections, and I am thankful that Paul thought of the objections while he wrote. It seems unfair of God to judge those whom he hardens! How can he judge those who cannot resist his will? Paul tells us in verses 19 through 24.

## II. IS GOD'S JUDGMENT OF THOSE HE HARDENS JUST? 9:19-24

**You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 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?**

When we ask whether God is just, what we are saying is that we are above the Creator. Thus, Paul answers, "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" This expression is rare in the New Testament. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the verb "*answer back*" is only found in one book, Job. When Job was defending his righteousness and when he thought he received undeserved suffering, Job 32:12 says, "No man could *answer back* Job." In the next chapter, a man named Elihu *answered back* Job and said, "Do you say, 'My righteousness is more than God's'?" In chapter 38, God answered Job:

**Who is this that darkens counsel,  
By words without knowledge?  
Now gird up your loins like a man,  
And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!"**

He asked Job pointed questions about creation, the universe and time. By the end of those questions, Job was in the dust and unable to answer God back. He had his face to the ground in utter humility.

When we ask if God is just, we are being perverted and arrogant. Our puny, human, finite standard of justice cannot compare to the infinite, almighty justice of God. When we judge God by our standards,

we are reversing our roles—being Creator rather than being created. The text clearly says we are mere men, not God. Who are we to answer back to God? The Creator has the sovereign right over his creation.

We move from the conversation with Job in the Old Testament to the image of the potter and the clay. Every time this image is used in the Old Testament, we see the potter having authority to make from the same lump two different vessels, one for common use and one for glorious use. The clay never says, "Why did you make me into a pot like this?" Rather it silently fulfills the purpose for which the potter made it.

Last Saturday, my nine-year-old daughter Jennie wanted to make a fort in the backyard so she could have a secret place of her own for hiding. After gathering all the wood we could find, I started cutting and she nailed the boards together. While we were working, the wood never asked us what we were doing. Since the wood is not in my league, it cannot answer back. It merely fulfills my purposes.

I think our spirits need to be repentant and reflect the words of Isaiah 64:8:  
**But now, O Lord, You are our Father,  
We are the clay, and You our potter;  
And all of us are the work of Your hand.**

Paul is trying to tell us the secret of history, of what God is doing. But he must prepare us to listen: "You can't hear it if you are not humble. If you are not like Job, lying repentant in the dust and letting the Creator do his sovereign will, you will not be able to hear what he is going to say." Humility is the prerequisite to knowledge of God's mysteries. In verses 22 through 24, Paul tells us that God is Lord over history as well as creation:

**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 in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.**

Paul tells us three things about God's program in salvation history. First, he says present injustices do not reflect God's tolerance of them or his impotence to act. Throughout our world, we see injustice. The Jews saw injustice and oppression in Egypt as well. There are some liberal scholars today who question God's motives and abilities. In fact, a contemporary

rabbi has written a commentary on the book of Job entitled *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* His conclusion is that God is impotent to act. He can only suffer with us. Paul says this is wrong. Present injustice reflects the patience of God, not his tolerance or his impotence. God is willing to make his power known, but he chooses not to.

Second, when God does act in justice, judgment and salvation are simultaneous acts. Thus, they reveal a greater magnitude of his glory and power than if he had acted when we wanted him to.

Third, there is a mysterious and vital relationship between the vessels prepared for destruction and those prepared for mercy. God has to work the two together in order to bring about salvation. Salvation cannot be a universal event. We cannot have salvation without judgment happening simultaneously.

Let me illustrate these ideas from the exodus from Egypt. Israel experienced 400 years of slavery and injustice before God acted. Then he raised up Pharaoh and preserved him for the ten plagues. In so doing, he brought the greatest nation to its knees. All the plagues were attacks upon Egypt's idolatrous world system. Did you know that the Egyptians worshipped the frog? In fact, it was a capital offense to kill a frog. But God made the frogs so numerous that people could not walk without stepping on one. What a divine joke! He was saying, "They are not gods. I am God!" In the Egyptian myths, the Nile was the blood system of a god called Ingu. When God turned the Nile into blood, he was saying, "He is not God, I am!" Then God killed all the first-born in Egypt, proving that all of Egypt belonged to him.

When Israel marched through the Red Sea, she was surrounded by the walls of salvation. When Pharaoh's army tried to pursue the people, the walls of salvation became walls of judgment. In response, the people wrote and sang Exodus 15. This was the first time in their history that they learned God was a warrior who fights for his people. Judgment and salvation happen at the same time to give birth to God's spiritual kingdom. He had to judge the world order which Israel knew before they were able to see his glory and might. The vessels prepared for destruction and the vessels prepared for his glory worked simultaneously.

Judgment and salvation are simultaneous acts. Whenever God births a new work, he has to judge the old world order. When Jesus came to earth, the church could not be born without judgment. Do

you think the coming of the Spirit came without judgment? Think of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. when the Romans wiped out the entire kingdom. Not one stone was left. The vessels of destruction destroyed in order to give birth to something new.

Paul then says something incredible. Who is considered to be the Pharaoh now? He says, "Back then, you Jews applauded the fact that Pharaoh was hardened so that you might be set free. Today you are Pharaoh! God has partially hardened you as a nation in order to save the Gentiles." No wonder Paul was stoned! That was not a popular message.

Is God just in rejecting his own people to save many from among the nations? Paul answers this in verses 25 and following.

### III. IS GOD JUST IN HIS "REJECTION OF ISRAEL AND "SELECTION" OF GENTILES? 9:24-28

As He says also in Hosea,

"I will call those who were not My people, 'My people.'

And her who was not beloved, 'be loved.'

And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people.'

There they shall be called sons of the living God."

Paul says the current rejection of Israel and salvation from among the nations is consistent with the character of God. This is what he has done throughout history. He draws support from Hosea, the best book in the Old Testament on the love of God. Hosea saw that the tragedy of his own home was a parable of the relationship between God and his people. He married Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and had a son. He said, "This son is mine and his name is Jezreel." Then she had two more children whom Hosea did not claim because he was convinced they were born from an adulterous affair. He gave them names that expressed his disillusionment. The first was called Lo-ruhamah, "one for whom no natural affection is felt." The second he called Lo-ammi, "not my people." These names pictured God's attitude toward his people because the Jews had broken covenant and gone after idolatrous Baal worship. But because of God's loyalty, he would not allow this to continue forever. Thus, he says, "In the place where it was said 'Not my people' I will call you..." God says he will change their nature by changing their names. He will one day call them sons again because he made an oath to them.

Paul applies this promise which was originally given to Israel to all the Gentile nations. He says, "These Gentiles were once vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. Now through the patience of God they have become vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory." No, God is not unjust in doing this. It is consistent with his character throughout salvation history.

Second, he says God's temporary rejection of Israel does not violate his covenant because he always spares a remnant. The heart of the theology in this text is found in verses 27 through 29:

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; for the Lord will execute His word upon the earth, thoroughly and quickly." And just as Isaiah foretold,

"Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity,

We would have become as Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah."

When the prophets like Isaiah and Micah wrote in the seventh century B. C., they searched the nation of Judah for one righteous man. What amazed them was that there was no longer a righteous remnant. No one responded to God. In fact, Micah says that he went out into the vineyard of Israel, craving a glimmer of righteous fruit to eat. He could not even find a first ripe fig. He concludes, "The godly person has perished from the land. There is no upright person among men. The best of them is like a briar" (Micah 7). These prophets understood that the depravity of the nation was complete. No one responded to God's grace and salvation. God said, "You want justice; you will get it. I will bring a complete annihilation."

But what happened? Isaiah named his son Sheer-jashub, "a remnant will return." Why? Because God made an oath to this nation to preserve them and to love them. The only reason they were not annihilated by the Assyrians or the Babylonians was God's grace.

The principle is that all have equal opportunity to respond, but no one does! If it is justice we want, Shakespeare writes in *the Merchant of Venice*:

*Though justice be thy plea, consider this,*

*That in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation.*

God spared a remnant solely by his grace.

According to Paul's argument, is God

unjust? Are you kidding! He maintains his right to be merciful and to harden. He is working his salvation plan as the Lord of history. At first, he hardened the Gentiles to save Israel. Now he is hardening Israel to save the nations. This is consistent with his character. His grace is totally undeserved. If we demanded justice, we would all be annihilated.

What are the implications of this text for us? I would like to leave you with four.

#### IV. THE IMPLICATIONS

First, we need to deal with our *arrogance* that wants to judge God and his ways of election. I think Genesis 2 and 3 are appropriate. If you are proud of your record and think God is in your debt, look back to the garden of Eden. Man in the best of environments, with every opportunity to respond to God and with all of life before him, is still a rebel. We are rebels to the core. Therefore, we need to deal with our arrogance of self-righteousness and live in humility. In all of history, we find the judgment of God to be just and deserved, but his grace is free and without cause.

As we live life, we must realize that we have no rights or claims on God. We do not have the right to have a nice job or to have good weather. We do not have the right to have easy marriages. Healing comes when we realize that we have no rights. We do not have rights as parents. We do not have the right to avoid suffering. One of our pastors, Bob Roe, always stresses this when he goes to the hospital for visitation. He asks people who have cancer, "Have you thanked God for this? If you thank him and acknowledge him as the Creator and you as the clay, he can work in your life. Until then, you are fighting an uphill battle."

I learned the theology of grace through my children. In 1975, when we lost our son, we gave him to the Lord and I had no bitterness. I knew God had a right to take my first-born. But having done

that, there settled in my heart a sense that I had done what was required and now God owed me and would prevent this from happening again. I remember Bob Roe asked us, "Have you dealt with the fact that you may never become parents?" That hit me hard, but I was not ready to hear the message. In 1976, when we lost a little girl to the same enzyme deficiency, I was shocked. Then I knew God could require anything of me. I had no rights. When God gave us Becky in a miraculous adoption fourteen days later, I understood grace. She was given to us for no reason, and we expressed great appreciation. When he gave us Jenny, I thought God did for us what he did for Job—he doubled our family! Then he gave us Katie, which was grace upon grace! I think my appreciation comes out of the hard situation of having to let the Creator be the Creator. We need to remove our arrogance and live in humility.

Second, this text addresses our *judgmental spirit*. Many of us live in unjust situations, whether they be difficult jobs, tough homes or some other circumstance. It is easy to accuse God saying, "Why don't you hear my prayers? Are you impatient? Why do you tolerate this sin?"

I have just returned from Eastern Europe. Three weeks before I arrived, the officials bulldozed the church in which I was going to speak. Instead of my speaking to 300, I could only speak to 50 in a home. The rest had to get my teaching by word of mouth. How would you respond to this kind of situation? What if Cupertino decided to bulldoze our building? The Eastern Europeans responded with two English words: "No problem!" That was their attitude in life.

My encouragement to you if you have a judgmental spirit is to let God be God. The key to salvation is endurance. When God does bring his salvation and acts in both judgment and salvation, it will be a glorious event—far more glorious than if he had acted when we wanted.

Third, this text offers *assurance*. If my salvation were dependent upon my fickle mind and wayward heart, I would never sleep at night. Because God in his grace has elected me, I sleep. I glory in my undeserved election. We have a hope for the future.

In fact, all ministry is based upon election. If we truly understand election, we will not be passive. Remember the word of God the apostle Paul received in Corinth when he was scared to death and ready to flee the city. God said, "Paul, do not be afraid, for I have many people in this city." Wherever we go, the sovereign God is with us and will bring forth his elected purposes to further his kingdom. We just show up and partake. When we preach the gospel, he will act. The basis for ministry is his sovereign election.

By far, I think the greatest application of this text is our *appreciation and praise*. In our age, many view salvation as cheap until they come to Christ and realize what it cost on the cross. We must also consider how many vessels of destruction it took to form this salvation in our hearts. This is what the Jew would have thought as he came out of Egypt. God had to destroy an empire to give him salvation. All the judgment that occurs in the world today is done in order that we might appreciate what has been freely given to us. The great teachers in church history who really understood the doctrine of election lived the most holy lives and revitalized the church in every age—John Calvin in the 1500s, John Owen in the 1600s, George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards in the 1700s, Charles Spurgeon in the 1800s. All of them were characterized by lives laid in the dust of humility. Their minds were in heaven, and their lips were full of praise and adoration for the most holy God.

Instead of being like children who thunder back at God that his ways are not fair, let us fall on our faces and proclaim, "O my God, there is none like you!"

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