

Text: Romans 9:19-24

Title: God's Sovereignty in Salvation: Making Sense of the Incomprehensible

Intro: A challenging section in the Book of Romans—mainly because the finite mind of man is seeking to comprehend the infinite mind of God

- A text that is not designed to give us comfort as much as leave us in awe and wonder
- A text that causes our flesh to recoil
- This is also a text that corrects man's lofty thoughts about God that are not found in Scripture.

In Romans 9, God is putting His majesty on display

- We cannot fully comprehend the sovereign purposes of God in election and predestination
- Yet, the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and whatever He does, He does for His glory.
- Whatever God does is consistent with His holy character.
- Therefore, whatever God does in His sovereignty is never to be challenged by His people.
- We can ask legitimate questions and in humility seek understanding.
- But we are never to challenge what God does in His sovereignty in saving sinners.
- The Apostle Paul is defending God's character—if God says He's going to do something, He will because God's character is without flaw and His choices and actions are always just, always best.

In this chapter, we see God being vindicated for what He does in saving sinners and how His sovereign purposes are accomplished.

- God made promises to the nation Israel (9:1-5), and at the time of Paul's writing, they were hardened in their unbelief and have remained that way unto this day.
  - Yet, Paul says that Israel has 'present' privileges—'the adoption as sons, the covenants, the promises' (9:4-5).
  - Why??? Because God promised to Abraham

The premise is: 'the nation of Israel is in unbelief—does God not keep His promises???' The Apostle Paul answers:

1) that it is not merely the physical descendants of Abraham who are God's children but those whom God sovereignly chooses,

- Being a physical descendent of Abraham does not guarantee your salvation
- Not every Jew believed and was saved—not in the past, not in the present, and not in the future—but God has and will preserve a remnant
- God sovereignly chooses according to 'His purpose...not because of works but because of Him who calls' (9:10)
- God can freely choose Issac over Ishmael, and Jacob over his twin brother Esau.

2) God never goes back on His promises—God's promises are irrevocable and without flaws, just as God's character is without flaws

Prop: The Apostle Paul anticipates objections and sets forth his arguments systematically:

1. God acts solely for His own glory and name's sake.

9:14—"What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!"—

- God is righteous and just, and His promises cannot fail because His character cannot fail
- God is holy and just—if God chose to save no one, He is still holy and just because all men are born depraved sinners and worthy of condemnation from a holy God.
- If God wanted to destroy Adam and Eve the moment they sinned, He would be righteous, and fair, and just.
- Apart from God's mercy and grace, mankind is doomed.
- However, God is a God who loves and saves—He is a God of mercy and compassion.
- But God never saves because of my need as a sinner. My need as a sinner can never compel God to do anything on my behalf.
- God acts because of His own desire to show mercy.

People will say, 'If God chooses some people for salvation and passes over others, doesn't that make God arbitrary and unfair???'

- It is God's prerogative to show mercy to one sinner and leave another sinner who already hates God in their unbelief.

Notice: 9:15—"For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."—what is that???

- From Exodus 32:1—Moses goes up to Mt Sinai and receives the two tablets of the testimony from God—while he is gone, his brother Aaron led the impatient people to melt down their gold jewelry and form a calf through which they were going to worship YHWH—as if it represented the true God (32:2-6).
- In response to that sin, God commanded that 'about three thousand men' be put to death.
- God would have been just in putting all to death who participated in that great apostasy, but only 3000 men.
- All deserved to be destroyed, but God spared some—for His own glory.
- Everybody should have died, but God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy and compassion on whom He will have compassion.
- The only reason the entire nation of Israel was not destroyed at that time was because of the sovereign mercy of God.
- God is a God of rich mercy—He alone determines who will receive mercy.

9:16—"So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."—no man can force God to have mercy—no human can initiate divine mercy—divine mercy must come from a sovereign God

- God does not save because man is a sinner and needs to be saved.
- God saves because it reflects His own character.
- God loves to save.
- Is God just in showing one man mercy and another His judgment???
- Since God owes man nothing and would be just if He saved none, salvation is always by His grace.
- God demonstrates all aspects of His glory—His wrath and power as well as His mercy and grace

9:17—"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."

- Pharaoh was an evil king over an evil/God-hating people
- God did not 'make' Pharaoh for this purpose but 'raised him up'—in other wds, God made him to be in the place he was...he was 'brought to a position of prominence'—God made him king over all Egypt
- Why??? Why all this??? Because God is driven by a passion to magnify His own name—"... THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH"
- God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Why??? Because God wanted to demonstrate even greater wrath and He wanted to show even greater mercy/compassion to His people.
- God is driven by His character and name—not by anything in human beings that could somehow 'compel' God
- The earth and the world are cursed, and nothing can compel God to do anything but His own mercy and compassion.

Interesting—both Moses and Pharaoh were sinners—if you think about it, both were murderers—and yet God showed one mercy and another He hardened

- Note: God never hardens someone's heart who has not already hardened their own heart
- God's hardening followed on what Pharaoh himself did
- Divine hardening always presupposes sin and is always part of the punishment for sin

God acts for His own glory and name's sake

The conclusion: 9:18—"So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires."

## 2. God's right to choose is manifest through His lavish mercy.

9:19—"You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'"—Paul's question makes an assumption in the latter part—'for who resists His will?'—the idea is 'no one'

- In other wds, 'If God made me as I am, and I cannot resist His ultimate will, why does He fault me for my sin?'
- If God shows mercy to some and leaves others to remain in their sin, why does He fault me for my sin???
- This is where the human mind goes—Paul knows that and anticipates that.
- 'How can God blame anyone for sin and unbelief when He has sovereignly determined that person's ultimate destiny'???
- Applying the same mentality to Israel—if God has hardened the nation of Israel and hidden the Truth from them for a time, why does He judge them for being spiritually blind???
- That kind of question is driven by the human idea that God creates some people only to condemn them—to send them to hell, and that they are passive in the matter.
- There is a subtle lie involved in that kind of statement.
- God did make man, but He did not make him a sinner.
- However, Paul doesn't even argue that point here. Instead, he calls out finite man for challenging the infinite God.

9:20—"On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?"—Paul is contrasting man and God—between human reasoning and the infinite wisdom of God

- It is never wise to elevate human ideas/human reasoning/human conclusions over the wisdom of an infinite God.
- We think our questions are sharper than God's answers.
- We think our reasoning exposes flaws in God or in His promises.
- We think our logic and conclusions are more accurate.
- Man, repeatedly wants to blame God for his own sin.
- Yet, God's ways are past finding out
- 11:33—"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!"
- When finite man cannot grasp the infinite wisdom of God and His sovereignty in salvation, that God shows mercy to some and passes by others, he tends to blame God and not himself.
- Paul's language here is like an ancient way of saying, 'Who do you think you are??? You're nothing but dust! What right have you to say anything in the presence of a sovereign God?'
- For the creature to question the Creator and His right to hold men accountable for their sin is illegitimate.
- It is legitimate to seek God, to seek wisdom and understanding—but that is not what is taking place here.

'who answers back to God'—is backtalk—a term that is always used in some sort of refutation/a bold challenge—it's not a legitimate quest for knowledge and understanding but rather self-justification. It's an attitude of pride that says to God, 'This shouldn't be how God should act.'

- The moment you exalt human reasoning and insinuate something that is not true in Scripture, you have a problem—that's unacceptable.
- As a mere man, you have no right to accuse God of unrighteousness.
- John Piper: "Paul has no objection when a person seeks to understand as much of God's dealings as possible, but he objects strenuously when a person criticizes and rejects the truth which he discovers. . . . For man to advise God about how he ought to act is as out of place as for a statue to advise a sculptor how to chisel. The presumption that a man's sense of values is ultimate and can prevail against God's sense of values is as ludicrous to Paul as a ranting figurine."<sup>1</sup>
- In 9:21-23, Paul denies the right to question God's sovereignty by insinuating that man is not deserving of judgment or that God is culpable and punishes sinners unjustly.
- One pastor: "Because human understanding is so limited, even most sincere questions about God's sovereignty—His election and predestination, must go unanswered."
- This one verse alone crushes all the arguments raised up against the sovereignty of God—it nullifies all errant human ideas and human intuitions that are raised up against the sovereignty of God:
  - Like God looked into the future to see who would believe
  - Like God made provision for all but it is my faith that chooses God

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.samstorms.org/all-articles/post/election-texts---part-vi> (Accessed: 08.09.2026)

- Like the ‘Open Theism’ movement that said God knows most things generally but is not meticulously sovereign—that when bad things happen, God is just as surprised as we are.

### 3. God has the right to choose as the sole Creator of humanity.

Notice: “...The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?”—a common analogy of the prophets in the OT

- Isa 29:16—“You turn things around! Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay, That what is made would say to its maker, ‘He did not make me’; Or what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding?’”
- Isa 64:6-8—“For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on Your name, Who arouses himself to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities. 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.”
- Jer 18:3-6—the prophet uses the same analogy—“Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make. Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, ‘Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?’ declares the LORD. ‘Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.’”—God has the sovereign right over all that He has made
- Man, as a sinner, makes up wrong ideas about God—the ‘clay bowl’ begins to question the potter’s motives and purposes.
- Martin Luther wrote these penetrating words to his humanist friend, Erasmus: “Mere human reason can never comprehend how God is good and merciful; and therefore you make to yourself a god of your own fancy, who hardens nobody, condemns nobody, [and] pities everybody. You cannot comprehend how a just God can condemn those who are born in sin, and cannot help themselves, but must, by a necessity of their natural constitution, continue in sin, and remain children of wrath. The answer is, God is incomprehensible throughout, and therefore His justice, as well as His other attributes, must [also] be incomprehensible. It is on this very ground that St. Paul exclaims, “O the depth of the riches of the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!” Now, His judgments would not be past finding out, if we could always perceive them to be just.”<sup>2</sup>—if God’s judgments could always be perceived as just, they wouldn’t be ‘past finding out’
- To fully understand God, we would have to be equal with Him—and that’s an impossibility.
- 11:34-35—“For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN?”
- The clay pot can never be equal to or greater than the potter who made it.

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<sup>2</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Romans*, vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 39.

4. God is glorified in the exercise of His wrath. 9:21—"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?"—this has nothing to do with God making His creatures sinners but God power/authority/His right to do with sinners whatever He chooses.

- In other wds, God never makes man a sinner—sin/rebellion against God is his own choice.
- But, what God chooses to do with fallen sinners is completely and totally His divine prerogative.
- God, as the potter, has the ultimate right to take one lump of clay, divide it, and make one lump for honorable use and the other for common use. He can take from the same lump and make whatever serves His eternal glory.

Q—"Does God make evil human beings so that He can destroy them???"

Notice: the rhetorical question—9:22—"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?"

- The Bible never teaches that God makes evil human beings in order that He would judge and destroy them—not in Romans 9 and not elsewhere in Scripture.
- God cannot be anything but light—there's no darkness in Him
- Human sin is always the cause for all divine judgment. The 'vessel of wrath' is clearly culpable.
- James 1:13—"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God;' for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone."
- JM: "Whatever God's sovereignty may mean in its fullness, it does not mean and cannot mean that He chose for men to become sinful. The perfectly holy and righteous God is not responsible in the slightest way for the sinfulness of His creatures."<sup>3</sup>

'vessels of wrath prepared for destruction'—implies that evil has already occurred and is deserving of God's holy wrath.

- God cannot make an evil sinner in order to destroy him—he is destroyed because of his own sin and refusal to believe God
- Calvin: "... the Lord had declared that "everything that he had made . . . was exceedingly good" [[Gen. 1:31](#)]. Whence, then comes this wickedness to man, that he should fall away from his God? Lest we should think it comes from creation, God had put His stamp of approval on what had come forth from himself. By his own evil intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord; and by his fall drew all his posterity with him into destruction. Accordingly, we should contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity - which is closer to us - rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God's predestination." (Calvin's Institutes 3:23:8)
- Man bears the full responsibility for his sin
- God allowed sin to enter and planned for it.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

God sovereignly allowed sin to enter the universe because it first gave Him the opportunity to demonstrate His wrath—His holy judgment

- God is as glorified in the exercise of His wrath as He is in displaying His grace
- God is ‘willing to demonstrate His wrath’—God allowed sin to enter the world because His wrath poured out upon sinners is glorious in that it displays His majestic holiness
- God also allowed sin to enter the world in order to demonstrate His power—just read the book of Revelation and see the fierce and fiery power that God displays in His ultimate judgment of all things.
- One writer: “God’s power, originally displayed in creation, will be equally glorious in destruction. It will be awesomely manifested in His vengeful, but wholly righteous and justified, conquest of all enemies who would attempt to conquer Him.”<sup>4</sup>

“...endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?”—ungodly people will experience the full wrath of a Holy God

9:23—“And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,”—

- ‘vessels of mercy’—implies evil—our evil—that we are guilty before God and in need of divine mercy
- All of us are ‘vessels of wrath’ until God makes some ‘vessels of mercy’
- While God has the right to make His Creation and work through it in any way that He pleases, vessels of wrath are viewed not as innocent victims of a cruel Creator
- ‘vessels of wrath’ are sinners, culpable for their own evil and worthy of God’s just wrath.
- ‘vessels of mercy’ are sinners, culpable for their own evil whom God chooses to demonstrate His love in such a way that manifests His perfections
- God is willing to demonstrate His wrath—but He waits...and endures with much patience
- Why has God allowed evil to run for so long when He is willing to judge it???
- From the Garden of Eden, God has borne with wickedness that offends His holiness—and one day, He will exercise His full wrath and bring Himself maximum glory.
- God is storing up wrath for the day of judgment which makes His divine mercy even richer.

‘He did so to make known the riches of His glory’—God created a world that He ordained that corruption would enter in order to manifest His glory

- Corruption came in by our doing—not God’s
- And, God ordained that He would patiently endure it
- God ordained that He would leave some in their hatred of Him so that His name would be honored in judgment—and in His patience, He is still saving sinners

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 40.