

“The Great Brain Teaser” (Romans 9:14–29)

Albert Einstein’s wife was asked the question, “Do you understand the theory of relativity?” She responded immediately, “No, but I know Albert, and he can be trusted.” This brilliant response by Meliva Einstein provides a tremendous principle for accurate biblical interpretation. There are some portions of Scripture that are so deep that we can’t understand them fully in this life. As finite beings we just can’t understand the infinite.¹ However, we know God, and He can be trusted.

In Rom 9:14–29 we encounter what may be the most difficult section in the entire Bible.² This passage on predestination has been notoriously labeled a “pastor’s graveyard.” Paul’s words are not terribly difficult at face value, but they seem to contradict other passages that emphasize human responsibility. Thus, many well-meaning Bible students attempt to marginalize predestination verses instead of letting any tension remain. However, when we study texts that deal with God’s election, we need to accept them as they stand and not try to figure out details that God has not chosen to reveal.³ Deut 29:29a states, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God.” In Isa 55:8–9 the Lord declares, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways . . . For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” Similarly, Rom 9 is written from the perspective of heaven looking over God’s shoulder. Hence, I don’t claim to fully understand it, I just claim to believe it.

Perhaps you’re reading this sermon and you’re thinking, “Keith, can’t you give me something more relevant? What about my marriage, family, work, school, and financial concerns? I need something that will touch my felt needs.” I can appreciate your sentiments; however, I believe that if your understanding of God increases and you grow closer to Him, that many of your personal concerns will take care of themselves. This week I read an article entitled, “What Makes a Preacher ‘Good’?” The first item that this pastor proposed is that good preachers “should give people a bigger picture of God.” The author quoted 2 Cor 4:5: “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord.” I agree with this perspective. My top goal as a pastor is to give you a bigger view of God.⁴ As important as your felt needs may be, it is your knowledge of God that is most important.⁵

In Rom 9:14–29 Paul says: *Let God be God*. He then provides three inescapable truths that relate to God’s choice. These truths should lead us to humble our hearts and prostrate our souls before our great God. Now, let’s take a deep breath, buckle our seatbelts, and humbly pursue an immense view of God.

1. God’s choice is a matter of His character (9:14–18). God’s saving choice reflects His mercy, not injustice. In 9:14 Paul writes, “**What shall we say then? There is no injustice⁷ with God, is there?**”⁸ The apostle raises consecutive, rhetorical questions because he assumes, in light of what he has said in 9:6–13 regarding God’s choosing, that there will arise a logical question. The question is, “Isn’t God unfair⁹ to choose some (e.g., Isaac and Jacob) and reject others (e.g., Ishmael and Esau)?” Paul answers with a firm, “**May it never be!**”¹⁰ The fact that God’s justice in election is questioned here points to the truth that election originates and is based only in God.¹¹ Some people argue that God merely foresees who will believe in Him and then chooses such individuals because of that knowledge. That may be a very attractive view because it removes some of the potential objections in this text. However, if that view were correct, then no one would voice any concerns. The rhetorical questions in 9:14 would be completely irrelevant because it would be a very reasonable thing for God to choose individuals that chose Him. No one would ever raise any objections and say that God is unjust. Again, stop for just a moment and ask yourself, why does Paul anticipate this question? If election is ultimately based on human decisions, this objection makes no sense. No one raises this question to someone who emphasizes “free will.” It is only to the doctrine of predestination that this question is raised.¹²

Paul now spends four verses building a case for God’s sovereign choice. He cites two proofs (“for,” 9:15, 17), from which he then derives two inferences (“so then,” 9:16, 18). In 9:15 Paul quotes Exod 33:19:

“For He says to Moses, ‘I WILL HAVE MERCY¹³ ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION¹⁴ ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.’”¹⁵ It is important to understand the context of this quote. In Exod 32 the children of Israel rebelled against God and made a golden calf in violation of the second commandment. The people were guilty and they all deserved to be judged and destroyed (32:10). Yet, God in His mercy only slew 3000 (32:28). In 33:12–23 Moses demanded various proofs and evidences of God’s presence. He even asked to see God face to face. God declined to grant that impossible privilege, but He did use the occasion as an opportunity to teach Moses about His sovereignty. In effect, the message from Exod 32–33 is that God does what He wants, and He doesn’t bother to ask for our opinion about it.

So, instead of attempting to defend God’s honor and explain why He is really just, Paul states that God pours out His mercy on some. Of course, the typical objection is: “But why doesn’t God pour out His mercy on all?”¹⁶ This objection misses the whole point. The real question is this: “Why does God pour out His mercy on anybody?” No one deserves His mercy. Instead, every person deserves to pay the penalty for his or her sin in hell. If God chose to show no mercy at all and pour out His judgment on every single person He would be absolutely just because this is exactly what we deserve. The amazing thing is that God shows mercy toward anyone! It is the theme of mercy that is the central point of this entire passage. Surprisingly, this is the first occurrence of the term “mercy” in Romans. God’s grace has been mentioned throughout the letter; but, not until 9:15 is mercy named. This timely inclusion reveals that until mercy is understood, grace cannot be fully appreciated. For, mercy is God withholding what we deserve, and grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve. May we cry out: “Lord, have mercy! Help me to understand just how merciful you have been to me.”

To demonstrate further God’s mercy, Paul writes in 9:16: **“So then it [God’s mercy] does not depend on the man [any person] who wills [desires] or the man who runs [acts],¹⁷ but on God who has mercy.”¹⁸** This is a very important verse because it demonstrates that salvation is strictly the result of God’s mercy.¹⁹ Even faith is not the ultimate cause of salvation. God’s mercy is behind our faith.²⁰ Although we are commanded to believe, salvation is nonetheless God’s work and His alone. Think this through: If salvation finds its origin in the will of the creature, rather than in the will of the Creator, then I can never be fully assured of my salvation, for I may someday lose my faith in God, or I may decide to reject my faith altogether.²¹ If the salvation of others is not in the control of God, then I have little reason to pray for the salvation of the lost. But if salvation finds its origin in the will of God, then I know that I am forever secure as a Christian, for even though I may change, God is unchanging. Since it was He who purposed my salvation and He cannot change, then my salvation is as certain as the One who is its source. If God determines salvation, then I may come to Him in prayer with the confidence that He is both able to save and that He takes pleasure in saving as well as in answering my prayers.²²

In 9:17 Paul provides another proof as to why God is not unjust: **“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.’”²³** Here Paul quotes from Exod 9:16. He cites the Egyptian Pharaoh who refused to release the people of Israel until God had done several miracles. The point here is that, even though the Egyptian Pharaoh defied God and hated the people of Israel, God had a purpose in this episode.²⁴ God “raised”²⁵ Pharaoh up for two purposes: (1) “to demonstrate” His power in and through Pharaoh (cf. 9:22), and (2) that the name of God might be “proclaimed”²⁶ throughout the whole earth.” Simply put, God wants His glory manifested in all the earth!²⁷ As much as He may love you, He is even more concerned with His glory and His supremacy. Until we understand this truth we will never fully grasp the Bible. Paul’s point is that even in his hatred and rebellion, Pharaoh serves as a witness to God’s greatness and glory. When human beings react against God, they think they’re acting on their own, and they think they can short circuit His plans, but actually God is using their very resistance to accomplish His purposes.

God used Pharaoh's resistance to display His power and make His character known. The inference Paul draws is that since God is sovereign over even evil people; He is clearly sovereign over salvation. In short, God has chosen to save in this way to glorify none other than Himself. *Let God be God.*

This leads Paul to state in 9:18, "**So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens²⁸ whom He desires.**"²⁹ Again, this verse emphasizes that God's choice does not depend upon our choice—it's a matter of His mercy. Most people, however, express angst over the fact that God "hardens whom He desires." Yet, it is important to understand the context of Exod 4–14. The text is clear that Pharaoh hardened his heart for the first six plagues. It's not until after the sixth plague that it says, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." God just brought out what was already there. God told Pharaoh, in effect, "If you are determined to have a hard heart, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to finish what you started. Since you want a hard heart, I'm going to make it like granite. I'm going to make it as hard as possible so you will know who is God in Egypt."³⁰

People are not lost because they are hardened; they are hardened because they are lost.³¹ If mercy is *not* giving people what they deserve, then the hardening of the heart is simply allowing what they deserve to run its full course. The hardening of the heart is, in that sense, pure justice.³² For instance, the rain that has just been falling the last few days is going to bring forth some beautiful flowers, but it is also going to bring forth some ugly weeds. Don't blame the rain for the weeds. It didn't bring the weeds; it simply revealed they were there. The grace and mercy of God does not place hardness in anybody's heart, it just reveals the hardness that's there. The same sun that melts ice hardens clay.

This verse brings to mind the truth that God did not intend to save all people. Rather, He reserves the right to choose whom He will save. Then, immediately someone says, "That's not fair! Everyone should have an equal chance to be saved, or God is unjust." These are dangerous words! We must be careful not to ever demand fairness or justice from God. I don't want anything to do with the justice of God. Remember, if all of us received justice, every one of us would be condemned for all eternity. The fact that some are not condemned is sheer mercy.³³ Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, said it best: "I believe the doctrine of election because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love. So I am forced to accept that doctrine."³⁴

Perhaps you're still saying, "This just doesn't make sense to me." I would suggest that the reason it doesn't make sense is because you and I don't have enough sense for God's sense to make sense. If I had a million dollars and decided that I would give \$50,000 each to ten people just because I wanted to, would there be any basis at all for someone who didn't get \$50,000 to accuse me of injustice? Of course not! I didn't owe the money to anyone. That I gave any of it away at all was a matter of my own choice. The only thing I could legitimately be accused of is selective mercy, and God apparently doesn't mind being accused of that. Now, had I given money only to good-looking, white males with college degrees I still couldn't be accused of injustice, though my goodness might be questioned. But God hasn't limited His mercy to *any* group, not even to the group He called as His chosen nation. He has shown mercy to some from every tribe, tongue, people, nation, class, age level, and gender (see Rev 5:9). Divine choice doesn't call into question God's justice; rather, it demonstrates His mercy.

[God's choice is a matter of His merciful character. A second great truth is . . .]

2. God's choice is a matter of His authority (9:19–23). God is sovereign in the actions He takes and gracious in withholding wrath or extending glory. Paul writes in 9:19: "**You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'**"³⁵ This is the exact question we are tempted to raise at this point. We might also be tempted to follow up this question with: "How can God blame people for

rejecting Him if He did not choose them?” Or, if God hardens people then why does He blame them for being hard? Now this is a great spot for Paul to include an apology or strong word of explanation. But he does neither.³⁶ He doesn’t try to soften his teaching nor does he feel the need to clarify or defend what he has previously taught regarding election. Don’t miss this! The question in 9:19 is only valid if the premise is valid. The premise of the question is that God is sovereign, and that He does choose to save some but not others. If the premise was wrong, then Paul would have corrected it here and now. But he doesn’t correct the premise. This further confirms that he is teaching the doctrine of individual election.

Paul even indicts the questioner for talking back to God: **“On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?”**³⁷ The question and the questioner are out of order. It’s a question that no one has a right to ask. We cannot approach God as though He were an equal or as if He had to answer to us. He is under no obligation to give us any answers at all. This is graphically illustrated for us in the book of Job. The book begins with a glimpse into heaven when Satan asks God’s permission to sift Job. The Lord grants Satan permission to do anything short of killing Job. For the next thirty–seven chapters Job goes through every type of trial imaginable. At the end of that time, God comes to Job and says to him essentially the same thing that Paul says here in these verses: “Who are you to answer back to God?”

What a great reminder to *Let God be God*. There are certain jobs that I’m not qualified for. One such job is anything dealing with automotive care. I can change my own oil, but that’s about it. Since I lack the necessary knowledge and skills, I have no right to tell an auto mechanic how to do his job. Likewise, I can’t walk into the home of another man or woman and change the rules of that household. I don’t own the place. Similarly, I don’t own this world. God does; and, He has a right to call the shots.³⁸

Paul backs up his theology with an Old Testament illustration. In 9:20b–21 he says: **“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 vessel³⁹ for honorable use and another for common⁴⁰ use?”**⁴¹ These verses are some serious “smack down.” Paul says, “Shut your mouth!” He puts you and me in our place! Paul is trying to hammer home the point that God is wholly unaccountable for His dealings with us.⁴² This is illustrated in the matter of the potter and the clay. Doesn’t the potter have the right to take a lump of clay, divide it in half, take half of the lump to make a beautiful vessel that is designed for display in a living room, and take the other half to make a slop jar or something for the kitchen? Doesn’t he have this right? Yes, he does. The potter has the right to do with the clay as he wishes. Does clay ever talk back to the potter? Of course not! In Paul’s analogy, sinful humankind is the lump of clay, which is sinful through and through. There is no neutrality in man—he is an enemy of God. So the question is not, “Why are some made to dishonor?” because dishonor is the natural state of the clay. The question is rather, “Why are some selected for honor?” Paul wants us to realize that we’re not the customers, we’re not the critics . . . we’re the clay!⁴³ And the potter always has full right over the vessels that he creates.⁴⁴

On an intensely practical note: Have you given “Potter’s Rights” to the Lord for how He made you, your personality, your looks, your physical makeup, your abilities and skills, your intellect, and the opportunities of your life?⁴⁵ Are you content with who God has made you to be and what He is doing in your life? Do you want to be like someone else, or do you want to have something more? You and I must realize that God has the right to do whatever He wants to us and in us and through us and with us.⁴⁶ We must submit ourselves fully to His use and *let God be God* over our lives.

Paul now comes to two of the most difficult verses in the entire New Testament.⁴⁷ In 9:22–23 Paul writes, **“What if God, although⁴⁸ willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience⁴⁹ 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.”** These verses

have brought more than one reader to his or her knees before our awesome God.⁵⁰ It's time to put your thinking cap on. In an attempt to simplify the complicated, let me make a few observations:

- 1) There is an obvious contrast between “vessels of wrath”⁵¹ and “vessels of mercy.”
- 2) Two different Greek words are used to translate the word “prepared.” In 9:22 the word “prepared,” referring to the vessels of wrath, is a passive participle with no clear subject.⁵² In 9:23 the word “prepared,”⁵³ referring to the vessels of mercy, is an active participle that has God as the subject. In 9:23 God is clearly the one who does the preparing.⁵⁴ In 9:22 Paul avoids God's direct involvement in the preparation of the vessels of wrath for destruction.
- 3) The “vessels of mercy” were “prepared beforehand.” The Greek word translated “prepared” has a prefix at the front of the word that means “before.”⁵⁵ This would seem to suggest that the vessels of wrath were prepared, but not necessarily in eternity past. Like Pharaoh, who hardened his own heart, and then God entered the picture and hardened his heart, the vessels of wrath may be prepared for destruction during their lifetime. But vessels of mercy are prepared in eternity past by God's election. This great truth should never be softened or finessed.
- 4) God's choices on these matters are not disclosed to us, and they are not meant in any way to cause despair.⁵⁶ It has been well said, “These truths were not meant to be a puzzle to the mind but a pillow to the soul.” The point of these two verses is to demonstrate God's glory, which is evidenced in His patience and mercy. Putting it simply: The “vessels of mercy” have only God to thank, and the “vessels of wrath” have only themselves to blame. The vessel of mercy can only say, “I'm in heaven because of God!”⁵⁷ While the vessel of wrath can only say, “I'm in hell because of me!” Those who experience eternal destruction will never be able to blame God or say, “I'm damned because God did not choose me!”⁵⁸ Their damnation is based not upon God's rejection of them but upon their rejection of God.⁵⁹

Imagine the following scenario. A man is imprisoned for a crime he actually committed; yet, he calls a press conference claiming to the world he's been unjustly jailed. His incarceration is not fair. Why not? “It's the governor's fault,” he says. Why is it the governor's fault? “Because the governor didn't give me a pardon. If he would give me a pardon, I'd be out on the street right now; but, since he didn't give me a pardon, I'm in prison. Therefore, it's the governor's fault I'm in prison, not mine.” Would you be swayed by that logic? I doubt it. Instead, you'd reply that the criminal is behind bars for crimes he committed—because he killed somebody, he robbed somebody, he stole something, or he extorted something. He broke the law, that's why he's in prison. Now, the criminal *might* be out if the governor chose to exercise mercy, but that isn't why he's behind bars. He's in prison because he's a criminal.⁶⁰

The same thing is true with us. We're in deep trouble with God because we are criminals against Him. If we go to hell, it's for only one reason: because we've rejected Christ as our sin bearer. Those who are punished are not punished unjustly. They are punished justly because they're guilty. It would only be unjust if they weren't guilty. If God chooses to exercise mercy on some people then it's His prerogative. We must step back, sit down, shut up, and *let God be God*.

[God's choice is a matter of His character and His authority. Now we will see a final great truth . . .]

3. God's choice is a matter of His program (9:24–29).⁶¹ Irregardless of how it may appear, God is bringing about His kingdom purposes. Paul concludes the whole argument of this passage by stressing the fact that the Gentiles are as much an object of God's mercy as are the Jews. The salvation of Gentiles is not an afterthought with God. Indeed, someone has well said that all saved are not God's afterthoughts, but His forethoughts!⁶² Our text culminates with four quotations from the Old Testament, in which the

same theme is sounded, namely, that it is because of God's grace and mercy that *any* are saved, and those He has saved are not saved because they belong to a certain race or class but simply because God chose them and loved them. Paul writes in 9:24–29: “. . . **even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. As He says also in Hosea, ‘I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, ‘MY PEOPLE,’ AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, ‘BELOVED.’ ‘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.’** Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, **‘THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED; FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD ON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY.’** And just as Isaiah foretold, **‘UNLESS THE LORD OF SABAOth HAD LEFT TO US A POSTERITY, WE WOULD HAVE BECOME LIKE SODOM, AND WOULD HAVE RESEMBLED GOMORRAH.’**” At first glance, you may say, “What’s the point of all these Old Testament quotes?” They speak to one of the primary objections against predestination. Many people think that predestination means that only a few people will be saved. Nothing could be further from the truth. God has determined to open the doors of heaven to the whole wide world. Anyone who believes in Jesus can be saved. In Paul’s day that meant that salvation was not just for the Jews; it was also for the Gentiles. Today there are approximately 13.5 million Jews in the world out of a total population of nearly seven billion people. Who are the Gentiles? That’s everyone who isn’t Jewish, which is roughly 99.999% of the world. If God had said, “I’m only going to save the Jews,” he would still be fair because no one deserves to be saved. We couldn’t complain if salvation were limited to a small group if that’s what God had decided to do. Remember, no one can talk back to God. But, He didn’t do that. These verses teach us that God opened the door of salvation to everyone!⁶³

At my former church, I became friends with a man named Scott Paxton. Scott is one of the godliest men I have ever met. But he’s also the absolute epitome of a man’s man. He’s a 6’3”, 190-pound cattle rancher who wears Wranglers, a cowboy hat, and sports a sweet, low-riding mustache. Because of his image, I nicknamed Scott, “The Marlboro Man,” in spite of the fact that he doesn’t smoke. Scott and I loved to shake hands, often “to the death”. Now, I’ve been fortunate to shake a great many hands in the course of my life, but no one can shake a hand like Scott Paxton. From his years on the ranch, Scott developed a set of mitts that could literally crush mine. However, I never wanted to give him the satisfaction of bringing me to my knees. Unfortunately, Scott had other ideas. He loved to tease me and humble me to dust. So whenever we would shake, I just tried to survive Scott’s vicious onslaught. Yet, I can remember one particular time in the middle of the church foyer when Scott enveloped my hand in what seemed to be a human meat grinder and squeezed. (He must have put some of his hand-squeezed cow’s milk on his Wheaties.) I experienced excruciating pain and what sounded and felt like the breaking of all the bones in my hand. It was a bitter and agonizing defeat! I had no choice but to fall to my knees and cry out, “MERCY!!! Scott, please stop—have mercy!”

Romans 9 is designed to bring us to our knees. As a result, God wants us to cry out, “MERCY!” He longs for us to acknowledge that it is His mercy that has saved us. He also wants us to cry out, “MERCY” because we recognize that His ways are incomprehensible.⁶⁴ If you don’t have a relationship with Jesus Christ, your concern should not be, “Have I been chosen?” but rather, “Have I believed?” Please humble yourself before the sovereign Lord of this universe, acknowledge your sins, and believe in Christ today.

Scripture References

Romans 9:14–29

Romans 8:29–30

Exodus 33:19

Psalms 115:3

Isaiah 55:8–9

Jeremiah 18:1–10

Ephesians 1:3–14

Study Questions

1. When have I recently questioned God's justice (Romans 9:14)? What was faulty about my thought process? If God treated me justly, what would happen? How has God shown me mercy and compassion in my salvation and sanctification (9:15–16)? How have these acts increased my appreciation for God and His goodness?
2. How does Romans 9:17–18 portray God's sovereignty? What appears to be God's endgame—His highest priority? Why is God's all-consuming desire for His glory such a difficult concept for most believers? How can I better understand God's commitment to exhibit His power and glory? How can I help others understand this great truth?
3. Do I have a right to talk back to God (Romans 9:19–21)? Is the creature wiser than the Creator? How can I have an honest and open relationship with God without disrespecting His sovereign will? Where is the proper balance between telling God everything I feel and honoring Him as the sovereign King of the universe?
4. Why did God choose to include the Gentiles in His program (Romans 9:24–29)? How does the kindness that God extended toward me make me feel? Am I a humble and grateful recipient of His grace, or do I really think God can't get along without me?
5. What are the practical benefits of what the believer learns from Romans 9? Particularly, what do you learn about God? What do you learn about salvation? What do you learn about humankind? How can we make sure our understanding of election does not impair our evangelistic efforts?

Notes

¹ As Christians we often want a god that we can put in a box. We want a god that we can understand and explain. As Tozer wrote: “Left to ourselves we tend to immediately reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him to where we can use Him or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control.” A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1961), 8.

² I will never forget the angst I felt when I read Rom 9 as a college freshman. I agonized through this chapter and felt utterly confused over predestination. Providentially, this same passage is now one of my greatest sources of comfort.

³ The Bible teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility without reservation or qualification. There is no actual contradiction, for God would never contradict Himself. The apparent contradiction exists either because we do not have full information or because we, as fallen creatures, cannot understand the issue. With our limited human intelligence we cannot and should not expect to understand the Bible completely. The Bible is infinite revelation. It contains truth so simple that a child can understand them and mysteries so complex that even a theological Einstein could not comprehend them.

⁴ Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

⁵ In John 17:3 Jesus said, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

⁶ Cf. Rom 3:5; 6:1; 7:7.

⁷ Barnett rightly states, “The barb in the question is the word, ‘unrighteous’ (*adikia*), which—they infer—Paul must be saying about God’s choice of one but not another. We remember that in Paul’s gospel the ‘righteousness’ (*dikaiosune*) of God is given to those who believe in Christ” (cf. 1:17). Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God’s Righteousness* (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2003), 213. Boa and Kruidenier observe: “Interestingly, the first time Paul was accused of making God unjust for condemning sinners (Rom. 3:5), and now he is accused of making God unjust for saving sinners (Rom. 9:14)! This alone is evidence enough of humankind’s basic problem: in our natural state, we simply resist the ways of God. We do not like it when he judges, and we do not like it when he saves.” Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*. Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2000), 283.

⁸ This question demands a negative answer (note the Greek particle *me*).

⁹ God is just but He’s not fair, and He never claims to be. By “just” He holds a moral standard; by “fair” He doesn’t treat all men equally (see Matt 20:1–16).

¹⁰ Other renderings of *me genoito* include: “Absolutely not!” (NET, HCSB); “By no means!” (ESV, NRSV); “Not at all!” (NIV); “Certainly not!” (NKJV); “God forbid!” (KJV); “Of course not!” (NLT); and “Out of the question!” (NJB). See the nine other uses of *me genoito* in Romans: 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 11:1, 11.

¹¹ Eaton aptly says, “Verse 14 proves that Paul really is speaking of true and unconditional predestination. God saves some and he does not say others. It is that exposition that leads people to say, ‘But that is not fair.’ A real predestination of individuals to salvation has been the theme of verses 6–13.” Michael Eaton, *Romans*. Preaching Through the Bible (Kent, UK: Sovereign World Trust, 2010), 165. Storms writes: “Would this objection ever have been raised and dealt with by Paul at such great length had the issue in view been the *historical* or *earthly* status of individuals? The objection, Paul’s vehement denial of unrighteousness in God, and his lengthy (vv. 14–23) explanation are intelligible only if *eternal salvation and condemnation* are at stake.” Sam Storms, *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 126.

¹² Lopez sees the election under consideration as referring to “earthly privileges and promised blessings that include eternal life.” See René A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield: 21st Century Press, 2005), 194.

¹³ Cf. Paul’s other uses in Romans: 9:18; 11:30, 31, 32; 12:8. The Greek word *eleos* (“mercy”) is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term *hesed*, which means “steadfast, covenant loyalty.”

¹⁴ The verb *oiktiro* (“to have compassion”) is only used here in the NT.

¹⁵ According to Piper: “by leaving the action unspecified the force of this idiom is to preserve the freedom of the subject to perform the action in whatever way he pleases. By simply repeating the action without adding any stipulations the *idem per idem* formula makes clear that the way the action is executed is determined by the will of the subject within the limits of prevailing circumstances. Therefore, when God says, ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will be merciful to whom I will be merciful,’ he is stressing that there are no stipulations

outside his own counsel or will which determine the disposal of his mercy and grace.” John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 62.

¹⁶ No one thinks it wrong for God to show mercy; they think it is wrong for God not to show mercy to all. When we think this way it shows that we do not understand mercy. We have it all backwards: God is not in debt to sinful people for anything except to give them justice. Mercy is not something that God owes us, otherwise it is not mercy—it is a debt. The OT prophets, who saw God and their own sin, knew that He had a chosen people. They never asked the question, “Why doesn’t God save everyone?” The thought never entered their minds! Their question was, “How could such a holy God save any one at all?”

¹⁷ See the NET: “So then, it does not depend on human desire or exertion . . .” Moo contends that human “willing” denotes “one’s inner desire, purpose, or readiness to do something” whereas the “running” points to “the actual execution of that desire.” Together, then, they “sum up the totality of man’s capacity.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 593. See also Eaton, *Romans*, 166.

¹⁸ As F. F. Bruce points out, “If [God] were compelled to be merciful by some cause outside himself, not only would his mercy be so much the less mercy, but he himself would be so much the less God.” F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 178.

¹⁹ The only other NT uses of the verb *eleeo* (“to have mercy”) are Jude 22, 23.

²⁰ Eaton, *Romans*, 168.

²¹ I am grateful to Erwin Lutzer for helping me clearly see this connection. See Lutzer’s balanced discussion of the Calvinism and Arminianism debate. See Erwin Lutzer, *The Doctrines That Divide: A Fresh Look at the Historic Doctrines That Separate Christians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 153–223.

²² See Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Sovereignty of God in Salvation” (Rom 9): www.bible.org/seriespage/sovereignty-god-salvation-romans-9.

²³ The purpose of God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart is stated in Exod 7:3–5: “. . . in order that I may multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.” Again, in 14:3–4, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart in order that He (God) might “be honored through Pharaoh.”

²⁴ The blockbuster film, *The Prince of Egypt*, would have been disappointingly short and unimpressive if Pharaoh had rolled over the first time Moses asked for the people to be released! Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans, Volume 2* (London: Proclamation of Trust, 2009), 68.

²⁵ Hart notes, “The notion of God’s raising up Pharaoh prepares for Rom. 13:1 ‘For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.’ The authorities that exist have been established by God.” John Hart, “The Letter to the Romans,” unpublished class notes (2010 ed.), Moody Bible Institute.

²⁶ The only other NT uses of *diaggello* (“to proclaim”) are Luke 9:60 and Acts 21:26. See BDAG s.v. *diaggello* 1: “to make something known far and wide, *proclaim, spread the news concerning/about*.”

²⁷ In Rom 9–11 Paul frequently mentions God (twenty–six times). References to Christ are limited (seven times), and the Holy Spirit has no place except in 9:1. The focus is “the glory of God.”

²⁸ Hart, “The Letter to the Romans,” remarks: “God doesn’t seem to harden the heart of every unbeliever. However, God has the prerogative to harden a person’s heart who refuses to believe. Every person deserves judgment. No one deserves mercy and God is not obligated to give it (apart from His promise to do so in response to faith).” Morris writes, “Neither here nor anywhere else is God said to harden anyone who had not first hardened himself.” Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 361. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 597 states, “God’s hardening does not, then, *cause* spiritual insensitivity to the things of God; it maintains people in the state of sin that already characterizes them.”

²⁹ Moo, *The Epistle of Romans*, 596–97 writes, “First, structural and linguistic considerations show that v. 18 is closely related to vv. 22–23, where the ‘vessels of mercy, destined to glory’ are contrasted with ‘vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction.’ As God’s mercy leads to the enjoyment of glory, God’s hardening brings wrath and destruction. Second, the word group ‘harden’ is consistently used in Scripture to depict a spiritual condition that renders one unreceptive and disobedient to God and his word. Third, while the Greek word is a different one, most scholars recognize that Paul’s references to Israel’s ‘hardening’ in Rom. 11:7 and 25 are parallel to the hardening here. Yet the hardening in Rom. 11 is a condition that excludes people from salvation. Fourth, it is even possible that the references to Pharaoh’s hardening in Exodus carry implications for his own spiritual state and destiny.”

³⁰ Tony Evans, *Returning to Your First Love* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 260.

³¹ Hart, “The Letter to the Romans.”

³² Boa and Kruidenier, *Romans*, 285.

³³ Stott offers this helpful analysis: “If therefore God hardens some, he is not being unjust, for that is what their sin deserves. If, on the other hand, he has compassion on some, he is not being unjust, for he is dealing with them in mercy. The wonder is not that some are saved and some are lost, but that anybody is saved at all. For we deserve nothing from God’s hand but judgment. If we receive what we deserve (which is judgment), or if we receive what we do not deserve (which is mercy), in neither case is God unjust. If therefore anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God’s.” John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 269–70.

³⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 227.

³⁵ The noun *boulema* (“will”) only occurs elsewhere in the NT in Acts 27:43 and 1 Pet 4:3.

³⁶ It is significant that Paul here offers no “logical” explanation for the compatibility of God’s sovereignty with the equally biblical teaching that God is scrupulously just and that human beings are justifiably blameworthy for their actions. We would do well to follow his approach: to affirm the truth of these great biblical doctrines without eliminating or weakening one or the other through an insistence on an exhaustive explanation.

³⁷ Revisit Job 38 or Isaiah 40 for an even stronger denunciation of humankind’s tendency to challenge God.

³⁸ Adapted and revised from Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 194–95.

³⁹ When the word “vessel” (*skeuos*) is used of people it always refers to individuals.

⁴⁰ “Common” (*atimia*) literally means “disgrace, dishonor, shame, humiliation” (see Rom 1:26; 1 Cor 11:14; 15:43; 2 Cor 6:6; 11:21; 2 Tim 2:20).

⁴¹ Cf. 2 Tim 2:20 which speaks also of vessels for honor and vessels for dishonor.

⁴² Moo writes, “Paul again does not answer as we might expect. He offers no logical explanation of how God’s determinative will and human responsibility cohere. Still less does he suggest that God’s will is but his response to human decisions—as we would have expected him to say if, indeed, God’s will to save were based on foreseen faith. No, rather than taking the defensive, Paul goes full speed ahead with yet further assertions of the freedom of God to

do as he wants with his creatures.” Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 311.

⁴³ As William Tyndale said so many years ago, “Now may not we ask why God chooseth one and not another; for God hath power over all of His creatures to do as He pleaseth.”

⁴⁴ This imagery is taken from Isa 29:16; 45:9–13; 64:8 and Jer 18:1–12.

⁴⁵ Hart, “The Letter to the Romans.”

⁴⁶ Eaton, *Romans*, 173: “In all of this there is great mystery. Paul is pressing us to the extreme limits of revelation. I do not think even Paul himself knew anything more than he is telling us. He is going to the extreme limit of what was given to him to know concerning this matter. Beyond this that he is sharing with us there is nothing but mystery.”

⁴⁷ They are especially difficult because we feel the need to protect God’s moral character. Our fleshly tendency is to elevate His love and ignore His sovereignty. We also have trouble reading and teaching these verses accurately because we see so many intellectual problems with this teaching. Then, there are the multitudes of dissenting opinions and objections that intimidate us and tempt us to take the easy way out.

⁴⁸ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 188–89 proposes the translation “because” instead of “although”: “Though Paul is now speaking more generally about ‘vessels of wrath’, the words of God to Pharaoh in Ex. 9:16 are still serving as the pattern for the way God acts. God’s raising up Pharaoh and enduring him through a ten-fold recalcitrance was not *in spite of* his desire to show his power but *because of* his desire to show it. God could have destroyed Pharaoh after any one of his acts of disobedience, and the reason he did not was that he might ‘multiply his wonders in the land of Egypt’ (Ex. 11:9). By ‘sustaining and tolerating’ Pharaoh again and again God accomplished his purpose to show his power in the plagues and finally to win renown in Pharaoh’s overthrow at the Red Sea (cf. the purpose mentioned in Ex. 7:3-5; 9:14-16; 10:1; 11:9; 14:4,17-18). Therefore, since Rom. 9:22 uses the same language as 9:17, it is more probable that God’s desire to show his wrath and make known his power is the cause of his sustaining and tolerating vessels of wrath than that this sustaining and tolerating are in spite of that desire.”

⁴⁹ Schreiner writes, “The implication is that it would have been just and righteous for him to destroy them immediately.” Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 520. See also Rom 2:4: “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” Harrison and Hagner propose that “God’s patience in bearing with the objects of his wrath suggests a readiness to receive such on condition of repentance (cf.

2:3–4; cf. 2Pe 3:9.” Everett F. Harrison and Donald A. Hagner, “Romans” in the *Revised Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 154.

⁵⁰ See Dan 4:35.

⁵¹ Some suggest the rendering “vessels destined for wrath” (e.g., Schreiner, *Romans*, 518), but it is more likely that Paul is referring to “vessels on whom God’s wrath rests” (e.g., Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 368; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 607).

⁵² The form of the participle *katertismena* could be taken either as a passive or middle (reflexive). Wallace argues strongly for the passive sense, stating, “The middle view has little to commend it.” First, *katartidzo* is nowhere else used in the NT as a direct or reflexive middle (a usage which, in any event, is quite rare in the NT). Second, the lexical force of this verb, coupled with the perfect tense, suggests something of a “done deal” (against some commentaries that see these vessels as *ready* for destruction yet still able to avert disaster). Third, the potter-clay motif seems to have one point: the potter prepares the clay. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 417–18. See also Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 607; Schreiner, *Romans*, 521–22. Other scholars prefer the middle form, so that the vessels of wrath prepared themselves for destruction. See Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 368 and James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 567.

⁵³ Gk. *proetoimasen* (a form of this word is only used in one other place in the NT, Eph 2:10).

⁵⁴ Note the 3rd singular construction of *proetoimasen*.

⁵⁵ Translated “in advance” in the NIV.

⁵⁶ The wise person will do as Tozer advised when it comes to election and predestination—he or she will “leave room for mystery.” Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 80.

⁵⁷ In a recent biography of John Stott, Stott refers to Francis Thompson’s poem, “The Hound of Heaven.” According to Stott, he owes his faith in Christ not to his parents or teachers or even his own decision, but to Jesus, “the hound of heaven.” He states: “[My faith is] due to Jesus Christ himself, who pursued me relentlessly even when I was running away from him in order to go my own way. And if it were not for the gracious pursuit of the hound of heaven I would today be on the scrap-heap of wasted and discarded lives.” See Roger Steer, *Basic Christian: The Inside Story of John Stott* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 262–63.

⁵⁸ *Katartizo* (“to prepare”) does not mean “create” in the sense that God created people purposefully in order to destroy them, but more like “put in a condition” (see BDAG s.v. *katartizo* 1). The vessels of wrath have put themselves into a condition where they are going to be destroyed.

⁵⁹ As I consider these most difficult verses, I am forced to echo the words of C. S. Lewis who said, “In the end, there are only two kinds of people in this universe: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done.’”

⁶⁰ Gregory Koukl, “Bad Argument against Calvinism”: www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5130.

⁶¹ While Rom 9:24 is grammatically tied to 9:22–23, it returns to the theme with which Paul started this section: God’s calling. In 9:7–13 Paul has shown how God called from within ethnic Israel a smaller number of Jews who formed a “spiritual” Israel. Now he shows through Hosea and Isaiah that this sovereign call of God has in the present time created a new people, composed of both Gentiles (9:25–26) and a Jewish remnant (9:27–29). These six verses demonstrate that God has included Gentiles in His program, and there is a remnant of Jews that will be saved. God’s program will never be thwarted because of His character and authority.

⁶² John Phillips, *Exploring Romans* (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), 152.

⁶³ Ray Pritchard, “Straight Talk About Predestination” (Rom 9:19–29): www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2006-05-02-Straight-Talk-About-Predestination/. Eaton, *Romans*, 178–79 writes: “God has a habit of saving those who are impossibly locked up in sin and seem to be beyond salvation. Those named ‘Not-My-People’ can be incorporated into God’s people. Those never known for being loved by God can be called ‘Beloved’. No one is too far gone.”

⁶⁴ One of my favorite verses in Scripture is found in Psalm 115:3: “Our God is in heaven! He does whatever he pleases!” (NET)