

"God's Purpose in Election"

A Review of Paul's Thought in Romans 9:10-18

By Peter M. Prange

I. Introduction

In his day St. Paul penned some pretty challenging words and concepts. No less an authority than St. Peter, himself inspired by the Holy Spirit, once wrote of Paul's works: "He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

Could it be that Peter was referring specifically to Paul's words about election and hardening in his letter to the Romans, chapters nine through eleven? Perhaps. Indeed, there are no more "hard to understand" words in all of Paul's letters, not to mention the entire Scriptures.¹ Paul's words concerning election and hardening are difficult to get a handle on because they do not perfectly square with human reason. From the first reading of Paul's *magnum opus* to the Romans, the question has probably been raised, "*Cur alii, alii non?*" (Why some, not others?) Paul "answers" that question in Romans 11:33-36, although not to our satisfaction. Finally, those matters must be left to the inscrutable knowledge and will of God.

So why write Romans chapters 9-11? Why does Paul delve into the whole subject of election if it finally leaves our minds bent like a pretzel? He did have a reason. In fact, as we shall see, in these three famous chapters St. Paul doesn't stray one iota from his message in the first eight chapters. Instead, he enters into a discussion about election to prove his argument to an even greater and more absolute degree: God has saved us by grace alone (*sola gratia*).² As we shall see, no teaching affirms this Scriptural truth more clearly and absolutely than election.

II. The background to Romans 9:10-18

A person could exhaust many pages explaining the words of Romans 9-11. That is not our intention here. This essay will deal especially with one very important snippet of Paul's thought in these chapters, Romans 9:10-18, because it is in these verses that Paul begins to plumb the depths of "God's purpose in election" (9:11). In other words, Paul gives us some lucid insight into *why* God chose to *elect* some to salvation from eternity.

As was stated above, the whole concept of election fits nicely into this letter's thought pattern. Paul begins in the first two and half chapters by reminding his readers of mankind's "godlessness and wickedness" (1:18). He warns those who would point the finger at others that when "you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same thing" (2:1). Even the Jews, who had God's testimony from ancient times, were not free from blame: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (2:24). Paul finally comes to this conclusion in Romans 3:10-20: "There is no one righteous, not even one...." We are absolutely enslaved by sin, and the law is powerless to save us.

"But," Paul continues, "now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:21-24). These words form the very heart and core of Paul's letter and the Christian faith. Nowhere is God's plan of salvation stated more clearly and emphatically than in these four verses. Our salvation is "*apart from law*," apart from any *doing* on our part. Instead, all people have been "justified *freely* by his *grace*" by a divine "crediting" of Christ's righteousness to our accounts. Christians receive the benefits of that gift through Spirit-wrought faith.

Paul goes on to substantiate that truth by the example of Abraham (chapter 4). "Abraham believed God, and it was credited [or "imputed"] to him as righteousness" (4:3). Paul then further explains the concept of *imputation* by comparing the first Adam with the "second Adam" (Christ). Paul concludes that "just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (5:18). In other words, in the same way that all people are condemned (declared "guilty") simply because of Adam's *imputed* sin, so also all people are justified (*declared* "not guilty") because of Christ's *imputed* sinless perfection.

Through faith – and particularly through baptism – Christians are now "dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore," Paul encourages, "do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (6:11). With those words Paul is recognizing the fact that Christians are still sinners. In chapter seven, he gives his own personal testimony about struggling with sin as a Christian. He finally concludes: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:24-25). In chapter eight, Paul goes on to deal especially with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian.

And then comes Romans 8:28. Here Paul begins to make a shift into this matter of election. He writes: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (8:28-30). Paul finally concludes that – as far as the elect are concerned – nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39).

At this point, Paul must have sensed an objection. Perhaps someone had already posed the question to him: "If God doesn't forsake his own – if nothing separates the elect from his love – then how do you explain what has happened to the children of Israel? I thought *they* were God's elect!"

Paul admits that he has great sorrow in his heart for his native people. "For I could wish," he even exclaims, "that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (9:3,4). His kinsfolk indeed had all the advantages of being God's chosen Old Testament people, Paul says. Most importantly, "from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all" (9:5).

So what happened? Why has God seemingly cast these people aside for his "new love," the Gentiles? Well, first of all, Paul says, "It is not as though God's word had failed" (9:6). In other words, God has not broken his promise; it stands firm forever. Secondly, Paul says, remember what God's promise is and to whom that promise has been given: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned (or "called"³).' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (9:6-8).

So then, Paul says, Abraham is not so much the father of *physical* Israel as he is the father of *spiritual* Israel, all believers, who have been called by the gospel and who trust in its promise. As Paul had stated in Romans 4:13,16:

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith....Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law [that is, his physical descendants] but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham [that is, believing Gentiles]. He is the father of us all.

In other words, the children of Abraham are children of the promise and the gospel (like Isaac), not children of slavery and the law (like Ishmael).⁴ Salvation then is by grace through faith and not by the law through works.

That is a recurring theme in the letters of Paul – both Romans and others – and now he takes that idea one step further as he delves into the teaching of God's election.

III. “God's purpose in election” as fulfilled in the history of Israel

Why hasn't God elected *all people* from eternity? That we don't know. Why are some saved, and others not? Scripture does not answer that question either, or at most the answer given is not a logical one. God's Word clearly states that if some are saved, it is entirely God's "fault" from start to finish. God alone works salvation (Ephesians 2:8,9). If others are condemned to an eternity in hell, it is entirely their own fault. Their stubborn hearts refused to trust in Jesus (Matthew 23:37). Paul writes nothing different in this epistle to the Romans, but the answer does not satisfy our curiosity.

So why election, and – since it is such a conundrum – why has God chosen to reveal to us that there even is an eternal election? In other words, what is God's purpose in election? Scripture actually *does* answer that question in Romans 9:10-18. Paul speaks very plainly here about "God's purpose in election" (9:11), and he holds up three examples in the history of Israel to help illustrate what that purpose is.

A. *Jacob and Esau (Romans 9:10-13)*

¹⁰ Οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ Ῥεβέκκα ἐξ ἐνὸς κοίτην ἔχουσα, Ἰσαὰκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν ¹¹ μήπω γὰρ γεννηθέντων μηδὲ πραξάντων τι ἀγαθὸν ἢ φαῦλον, ἵνα ἢ κατ' ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις τοῦ θεοῦ μένη. ¹² οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος, ἐρρέθη αὐτῇ ὅτι Ὁ μείζων δουλεύσει τῷ ἐλάσσονι ¹³ καθὼς γέγραπται, Τὸν Ἰακώβ ἠγάπησα, τὸν δὲ Ἡσαῦ ἐμίσησα.

¹⁰ *Not only that, but also [consider the case of] Rebekah: she conceived [twins] from one [man], Isaac our father, ¹¹ and even before they were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might endure: ¹² [namely,] "not by works but by the one calling" – it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it has been written, "Jacob I loved; but Esau I hated "*

In Romans 9:7-9, Paul had begun his review of Israel's history by calling to mind the account of Isaac's birth. In this, as well as in the other historical recollections, Paul is expecting his readers to consider the entire account without re-telling the entire story. In verses 7-9, Paul's point was obvious: Isaac was the child of promise; Ishmael was not. Isaac became the father of Israel and the Messiah; Ishmael did not. Isaac was an example of God's purpose in election. It was a free choice. A promise.

"But," some may have objected, "that was an easy choice for God, one based on an obvious standard. Isaac was the son of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Ishmael was the son of Hagar, a slave-woman. God's choice of Isaac, therefore, was based on the fact that he was the 'legitimate' son of Abraham and Sarah."⁵

Paul obviously anticipated that objection, so in verses 10-13, he heightens the argument. In verse 10 he asks us to consider the example of Isaac and Rebekah and their twin sons, Jacob and Esau. These boys had the same mother and father. There was no genetic difference, and yet there *was* a choice made by God between the two.

In verse 11 Paul builds the argument. He reminds us that God made this choice "even before they were born or had done anything good or bad." And why? "...in order that God's purpose in election might endure," namely, that salvation is "not by works, but by the one calling." These boys were equals before God, and yet there was a free and purposeful choice. Why God chose Jacob over Esau, we cannot know. The difference was neither in the twins (good or bad) nor was it in God, who from eternity loved them both equally. Still, Jacob was chosen, and, as history played itself out, Jacob and his children (Israel) were richly blessed; Esau and his children (Edom) were not (9:13).⁶

Why Jacob, not Esau? Why some, not others? We simply can't know. But we *can* know why God *made a choice*. We are told what "God's purpose in election" is. Paul says that God elected some from eternity because eternal election *ensures* that salvation is unconditionally granted, free, by grace alone, *sola gratia*. It is not based on *any* standard or *any* merit of the elect whatsoever. Just look at the example of Jacob and Esau, Paul says! From eternity they were equals, yet God made a purposeful choice between the two, and that sovereign choice was made absolutely independent of any preexistent condition, foreknowledge or merit.⁷

The line of thought in Paul's argument is both spine tingling and profound. We tend to consider the "freeness" of our salvation merely from our point of view (egocentrically). We hear that God's salvation is *free*, and we think to ourselves, "That means that I don't have to pay for it or do anything to get it. It's free *for me*." It's almost like getting something free at the grocery store, only better!

But in these verses Paul challenges us to consider our salvation from God's point of view (theocentrically). In other words, what does it mean for God that he has "justified [us] *freely* by his *grace (sola gratia)*" (3:24)? It means this: that from God's standpoint our salvation is an absolutely free, unconditional, unsolicited, unrestricted, unrestrained, totally independent act of his will!⁸ He could just as well have not granted us salvation and have been equally as just. It was *his* free choice. It isn't based on *anything* but the gracious will of our God and his unconditional love in Christ Jesus. It is *truly* free, unlike all the "free" things in our world, which still inevitably come with *some* string attached. Scripture's teaching on election then – more than any other teaching – demonstrates the clear *sola gratia* principle of God's salvation. Our salvation is strictly based on God's unconditional love, nothing else.

Earlier in his letter to the Romans Paul proved our *sola gratia* salvation and God's unconditional love by pointing to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. He had stated then that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8). Certainly Christians know and believe that this act of love was also independent of any merit or worthiness on our part. Christ died for us even though we were still his enemies. Christ then showed an unconditional love *sola gratia*.

But others *could* argue with the assertion that Christ's act was unconditional. Certainly when Jesus died, they might say, friendships had already been established on earth, with his disciples particularly. So, as Jesus himself said, he laid down "his life for his *friends*" (John 15:13), and this *friendship* was based on *some* condition or circumstance besides unconditional love. And, they might point out, even Paul admits that "for a good man someone might possibly dare to die" (5:7), a *conditional* act. Soon the concept of *sola gratia* is lost or at best muddled!

But that simply cannot happen if we hold to the Scriptural teaching of election in Romans 9. No teaching of Scripture drives home more forcefully the profound truth of God's *free* and *unconditional* love than the concept of election. God's eternal election, by definition, *must* be *sola gratia*. In fact, the *sola gratia* of election is imperative for our faith if salvation is to be guaranteed. *This* then is "God's purpose in election": that it might be absolutely clear and absolutely guaranteed – and believed beyond the shadow of a doubt! – that salvation is "not by works, but by the one calling."⁹

Significant in verse 11 is Paul's use of the word *προθέσις*, literally "a thing previously laid down." In all but one instance, Paul uses that word in his epistles to describe the concept of God's eternal purpose in election.¹⁰ Commentators Sanday and Headlam write: "From Aristotle onwards *προθέσις* had been used to express purpose; with St. Paul it is the 'Divine purpose of God for the salvation of mankind,' the 'purpose of the ages' determined in the Divine mind before the creation of the world." These men mention that a similar idea can be expressed by the word *βουλή* but that Paul chose to use that word only once in his letters.¹¹ Instead he introduces the word *προθέσις*. "The conception [of God's eternal purpose] is worked out by the Apostle with greater force and originality than by any previous writer, and hence he needs a new word to express it."¹²

And, again, what is that "purpose" in election? To guarantee our *sola gratia* salvation. Finally, God's election is *the* defining moment in the history of salvation and the gospel. Election is not only the starting point, but the *sum total* of what the gospel really is, what it really means, and what it really encompasses. Election guarantees that our salvation can *only* be *sola gratia*, because that choice was made before anyone "was born or

had done anything good or bad.” *Here* is unequivocal proof, Paul might have added, that the gospel far exceeds the law, both in time as well as in scope and in purpose.¹³ The gospel is not a slave to the law or an afterthought of God. It was his original plan, as Professor John Ph. Koehler once wrote:

The gospel...is not the complement of the law of God, which was first given after the law had made a fiasco; it is rather the *original truth (Urwahrheit)* of the real nature of God, divine love entire. In order to emphasize this thought, Scripture reveals to us that already before laying the foundation of the world God elected us in Christ, the Savior of sinners.¹⁴

In other words, in election we have absolute proof that God's love, mercy and grace are free and unconditional, by which our salvation is guaranteed. That is “God’s purpose in election...[namely] ‘not by works, but by the one calling.’”

B. An objection (Romans 9:14)

¹⁴ Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν; μὴ ἀδικία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ; μὴ γένοιτο

¹⁴ *What then shall we say? There isn't unrighteousness with God, is there? May it not be!*

Paul anticipates the next objection: “But if God doesn't make his choice according to some legal standard – either good or bad – that must mean that God is unjust! And if God doesn't make his election on the basis of worthiness or unworthiness, isn't he simply encouraging sin and unrighteousness?”

According to human reason this objection is *absolutely logical* and *justifiable*. In election, God is not “just” according to our human standard of justice, no more than a jury would be just if they were to freely decide a case before hearing a shred of evidence.

But what a dangerous thing it is to judge our God and his decisions according to *our* standard of justice! God's decisions *must* be just, because they are *God's* decisions. As Luther wrote: “For it is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens must be right.”¹⁵

Paul himself answers the objection very strongly: “May it not be!” In verses 20 and 21 he amplifies his answer against those who would question God's justice by questioning them: “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” Luther, too, wrote of the danger of questioning God on this or any other matter:

[Are we prepared] to say with the murmurers and blasphemers: “Why does he still find fault? Who can resist his will? Where is the God who is by nature most merciful? Where is he who desires not the death of a sinner? Or has he created us in order that he may enjoy the torments of men?” and such like complaints, which will be howled out by the damned in hell forever.¹⁶

Again, God has not revealed the truth of election to answer the question: “Why some, not others?” That is left to his inscrutable will. Instead he has revealed this truth to answer the question: “Why some *at all*?” God's purpose in election is to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that salvation is “not by works, but by the one calling,” an absolutely independent act of God's sovereign will, *sola gratia*. But to many, God's free mercy seems unjust and an encouragement toward unrighteousness.¹⁷

C. Moses and the children of Israel (Romans 9:15,16)

¹⁵ τῷ Μωϋσεῖ γὰρ λέγει, Ἐλεήσω ὃν ἂν ἐλεῶ, καὶ οἰκτιρήσω ὃν ἂν οἰκτίρω. ¹⁶ ἄρα οὖν οὐ τοῦ θέλοντος οὐδὲ τοῦ τρέχοντος, ἀλλὰ τοῦ ἐλεῶντος θεοῦ.

¹⁵ For to Moses he says, “I will show mercy to whom I show mercy, and I will show compassion to whom I show compassion.” ¹⁶ So then, [salvation is] not by wishing nor striving, but by God's showing mercy.

Accusations of unrighteousness were not new to God in Paul's day. He had been confronted with them before. In fact, even his servant Moses had once insinuated that if the Lord were to destroy the children of Israel, he would be unjust – or at least the heathen nations would think so. In Romans 9:15-16, St. Paul returns to that interesting account to see what God's answer was to Moses' concern.¹⁸ Once again, Paul would have us consider the entire history of events.

In verse 15 Paul quotes the Lord from Exodus 33:19, when he said to Moses: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Students of Exodus will immediately recognize that these words come on the heels of Israel's rebellious casting of the golden calf (Exodus 32).

Moses was away at the time, receiving the Law on Mt. Sinai, when God informed him of his people's idolatry. The Lord even went so far as to disown these people, saying to Moses that they are “*your* [my emphasis] people” (Exodus 33:7). He fumed, “They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt’” (Exodus 32:8). The Lord immediately contemplated his retribution: “I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked [hardened] people. Now leave me alone that my anger may bum against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation” (Exodus 32:9,10).

But Moses mounted a defense on Israel's behalf. “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people” (Exodus 32:12). In other words, Moses insinuates that if God were to destroy his people, he would be viewed as unjust and capricious. There would be ἀδικία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ (unrighteousness with God), as would later be argued in Romans 9:14. Moses appealed to the law, attempting to “pin God in,” but the Lord was unconvinced. God would need to remind Moses: “I can do whatever I desire – *even destroy my own people* – and I would still be just. My mercy is a *free* expression of my will. *Sola gratia.*”

Moses' argument became more convincing when he appealed to God's gracious promises of old (the gospel): “Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever’” (Exodus 32:13). Then, we are told, the Lord relented from his immediate intent.

But God's fierce anger was not abated, a common oversight in the recalling of this account. His promise to Abraham would be kept, but the Lord also promised, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin” (Exodus 32:33,34). The Lord would not go with them because, he said, “If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you” (Exodus 33:5).

Moses was not happy with the “compromise” of being led by God's angel, so he continued to serve in his lawyerly capacity. He wouldn't budge an inch without the Lord himself at the head of this great exodus. Again he attempted to appeal to the promises of God: “Remember that this nation is your people” (Exodus 33:13).

The Lord assured Moses, “My Presence will go with you [singular], and I will give you [singular] rest” (Exodus 33:14). However, this was only a “half-concession” on the part of God, as his promise included only Moses himself. Moses was not satisfied, so he tried again: “How will anyone know that you are pleased with

me and with your people unless you go with *us* [my emphasis]? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:16). Finally the Lord conceded, although – again! – with reservations, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you [singular] and I know you [singular] by name" (Exodus 33:17). The Lord's displeasure with that nation of Israel as a whole was still evident.¹⁹

Moses knew this and wanted visible proof of God's intent to go with them, and so he said, "Now show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18). In modern society we might say, "Shake on it!" However, the Lord refused him the privilege because, he said, "No one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Still, the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence" (Exodus 33:19). This would be Moses' assurance of the Lord's abiding presence.

It is then that the Lord speaks the words quoted in Romans 9:15, as if to remind Moses of this important truth: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Most commentators suggest that the theme of the Lord's message to Moses in Exodus 33:19 is that he is *merciful*. Professor Ernst Wendland, for instance, writes, "What a beautiful reminder [of God's mercy] lies in these words!"²⁰

While it certainly is true that the Lord *is* merciful – and he *is* certainly making that point to Moses – context suggests that the Lord's more immediate message to Moses is this: "*I have absolute freedom to do whatever I desire to whomever I want; yet I am always just.*"²¹ His will is absolutely independent, and yet he is just no matter what he does. God's mercy then is *sola gratia*. Not even a courtroom full of "lawyering" on Moses' part nor an appealing to any human standard of justice (law) was going to change that!²² And so while one can suggest that the Lord's main point in Exodus 33:19 is that he is *merciful*, the fact remains that – when it was all said and done – the Lord ultimately showed *little mercy* toward those who rebelled against him at Sinai. Their hearts were hardened. True, he may have held his punishment in abeyance for many years (which is *indeed* an act of his mercy), but punishment was eventually meted out. Scripture bears that fact out emphatically.

For instance, the Lord was still fuming in Numbers 14:21-23:

...As surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times – not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.²³

Psalm 95 gives this warning:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."

The writer to the Hebrews all but says that these people not only failed to enter the rest of the earthly Canaan but also the heavenly Canaan²⁴:

Who were those who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief (3:16-19).

These people of Israel were indeed stiff-necked and hardened, and the Lord's anger against them raged. Yet, he showed mercy for the sake of his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He would not destroy the line of the Savior, even though he would punish these people for their rebellion. That was his decision, and his decision was just. Nothing Moses said could sway him.

Paul's point in quoting this verse then is obvious: God needed to remind Moses of his absolute freedom to do as he desires. No matter the gravity of Moses' arguments, God was going to do what he was going to do freely. His mercy is *sola gratia*, and he certainly doesn't need to justify his actions to anyone. He does as he pleases (Psalm 115:3). Others in history have needed that reminder. For instance, David needed that reminder (2 Samuel 6:7,8); Job needed that reminder (Job 38:2); Jonah needed that reminder (Jonah 4); the vineyard workers needed that reminder (Matthew 20:15); we all need that reminder (Isaiah 40:13,14).

And, despite all insinuations to the contrary, God is *always* just. We may have trouble understanding that because his standard of justice is so profoundly different (and much higher) than our own, but again as Luther so magnificently states: "It is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens must be right."²⁵ In other words, "I will show mercy to whom I show mercy, and I will show compassion to whom I show compassion." Whatever God does is right and just. No one can question his decisions. And, most importantly to Paul's argument in these verses, since God's eternal will is independent and free, his mercy *must* be *sola gratia*.

"So then," Paul concludes, "[salvation is] not by wishing or striving," not even the "wishing or striving" of the great prophet Moses. Instead, salvation comes only "by God's showing mercy." It is *sola gratia*.

D. Pharaoh (Romans 9:17,18)

¹⁷ λέγει γὰρ ἡ γραφή τῷ Φαραῶ ὅτι. Εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐξήγειρά σε ὅπως ἐνδείξωμαι ἐν σοὶ τὴν δύναμίν μου, καὶ ὅπως διαγγεῖν τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐν πάσῃ τῇ γῆ. ¹⁸ ἄρα οὖν ὃν θέλει ἐλεεῖ, ὃν δὲ θέλει σκληρύνει.

¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you so that I might display in you my power and so that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ So then, to whom he wills, he shows mercy, and whom he wills, he hardens.

Pharaoh is St. Paul's third example from history of God's demonstrating his purpose in election, albeit a rather disheartening example from our perspective since Pharaoh's heart was hardened.²⁶ But once again Paul would have us recall the entire account. Professor Koehler summarizes that history for us:

The context in the 18 passages in Exodus that relate the hardening of Pharaoh is the following: Moses comes to the king and demands that he let the people of Israel go. Pharaoh refuses to obey the command of God. The miraculous punishments soften him up, but each time, when he gets relief, he refuses to let the people go. This repeated and continued refusal and opposition to the demand of God which he received through Moses and to the attraction in the gentleness and forbearance of God has the result that the king becomes less and less open to the Word of God and thus hastens ever further, quicker, and irresistibly toward judgment and ruin. This Scripture calls hardening and obduracy....This condition may already before Moses' arrival have been latent; the fact that now God's Word, accompanied by miracles, approached him exposed this latent condition and brought on the catastrophe....Therefore he went ever deeper into this trait of opposition to God; there were harder and harder judgments, which forced him to momentary submission, and when the last judgment, the slaying of the firstborn, was not effective for long, but he pursued Israel to bring them back, then he went to his destruction.²⁷

Romans 9:17,18 can be particularly challenging verses. Over the centuries many commentators have maintained that Paul is here suggesting that God from eternity had *predetermined* that Pharaoh would be hardened in unbelief and that Pharaoh had no chance to resist God's sovereign decree. To complete their argument these commentators appeal to verses 19-23 where, they say, Paul is attempting to defend God from accusations of unfairness in electing some for damnation by asserting God's absolute freedom and right to do what he wants.²⁸

That in these verses Paul is asserting – even defending – God's absolute freedom in decision-making is beyond dispute. That has been Paul's purpose since verse 11. What is really under dispute, rather, is the *nature* of God's decision in verse 17. *What* had God decided about Pharaoh in his foreknowledge? And how was Pharaoh – particularly Pharaoh's hardening – intimately tied up with God's purpose in election? Paul actually offers a most clear answer to that question in his quotation from Exodus 9:16. In fact, his point is rather obvious, but again we must return to the context of Paul's quotation to fully appreciate its meaning and import to Paul's line of thought in these verses.

Please recall the course of events. By Exodus 9, the Lord had already inflicted Pharaoh and the Egyptians with six plagues in an attempt to compel Pharaoh to release the Israelites from their slavery. As Koehler stated, each miraculous event “softened him up,” but in the end Pharaoh refused to let God's people go.

Even from eternity God realized that this would happen because God has perfect foreknowledge. Already in Exodus 4:21 – even before Moses had returned to Egypt – the Lord had clearly delineated the outcome of his prophet's mission: “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.”

Here an important distinction between *foreknowledge* and *election* must be made. Scripture is clear that, even though he *foreknew* Pharaoh's obduracy, the Lord's foreknowledge was not the *cause* of that obduracy. In other words, God had not *elect*ed Pharaoh for hardening from eternity, even though he *knew* that Pharaoh would be hardened in his unbelief.²⁹ Moses is very careful to point out repeatedly that at first *Pharaoh* hardened his own heart. That God too was involved in Pharaoh's hardening – even from the beginning – is certainly true, but this hardening was inaugurated by *Pharaoh*, not God. Pharaoh was responsible for it.

But back to the point at hand...by Exodus 9, Pharaoh's hardening had developed to the point to where Moses now writes that “*the Lord* [my emphasis] hardened Pharaoh's heart” (9:12). Pharaoh's time of grace had expired. No longer was there even the remotest ability for his heart to be moved or “softened up” by God's Word and those miraculous signs – if even for a moment. His hardening was complete; his damnation was assured.

And yet, even though God had determined to punish Pharaoh eternally, he allowed this already condemned man to live in his hardened state without any chance whatsoever of being converted. Why? What *good* could come from it? Isn't God *encouraging* evil by allowing Pharaoh to live? Does God then become the author of evil? Is there – as was suggested in verse 14 – “unrighteousness with God?” Why not simply destroy Pharaoh since he was already judged? In Exodus 9:15, the Lord reminds Pharaoh that he could have done just that: “For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth:” God *could* have done it, but he didn't. Why? Because even from eternity this “object of wrath prepared for destruction” (Romans 9:22)³⁰ had been fitted into God's purpose in election.

And now in Exodus 9:16, the Lord reveals that purpose: “But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” While he had not *predetermined* Pharaoh's hardening, already in his foreknowledge God *had* determined how he was going to use Pharaoh's hardening to the benefit of others. Through Pharaoh's hardening God's power would be displayed and his name would be proclaimed. *That* is the nature of God's decision in this matter: he would use Pharaoh's hardening to bring others to faith.³¹

In other words, Pharaoh was a doomed man “prepared for destruction,” but the Lord held his ultimate punishment in abeyance so that through Pharaoh's hardening the Lord could *have mercy* on others. That might *seem* like a particularly cruel and unmerciful action toward Pharaoh. Some would perhaps suggest that Pharaoh deserved more “respect” from God, and that the Lord shouldn't have *used* Pharaoh in that way. But Paul defends the Lord's decision by concluding: “So then, to whom he wills, he shows mercy; and whom he wills, he

hardens." God can do what he wants, and no one can question his free decisions! He is the creator; we are the creature! He owes us nothing, and he owed Pharaoh nothing.

That this is Paul's point becomes obvious as you move ahead to Romans 9:22. There Paul asks a rhetorical question in view of what he has stated in verses 15-18: "[So] what if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction?" That question leads directly out of the examples of rebellious Israel and Pharaoh.

The Lord was ready to destroy those stiff-necked people of Israel (Exodus 32:10), but he didn't – not because of Moses' "lawyering" but because of his free mercy, *sola gratia*. For his mercy's sake the Lord would save a remnant from whom the Christ would be born. His promise to the fathers endured.

So too the Lord was ready to destroy Pharaoh and all Egypt (Exodus 9:15), but he didn't. Instead he hardened Pharaoh to display his power and proclaim his name for his mercy's sake. In both cases, the Lord "bore with great patience the objects of his wrath" so that his purpose in election might endure: "not by works but by the one calling." God's *sola gratia* salvation is ensured by his eternal election.

IV. Conclusion: God's purpose in election is to ensure *sola gratia*

In Romans 9:11-18 Paul has not written anything different than he had in the first eight chapters of his letter to the Romans. Instead he has simply reinforced the central teaching of the gospel: that God's mercy is absolutely dependent on his free will alone. It is *sola gratia*. We *can't* do anything to earn or deserve it. It is an impossibility, since "I will show mercy to whom I show mercy, and I will show compassion to whom I show compassion." There is no standard of God's eternal justice that we humans can comprehend. We must simply trust (*sola fide*) that his promises of salvation are true (*sola scriptura*). That is both scary and comforting at the same time.

It is scary because we are sinners. Even Luther admitted his fear when he contemplated the Scriptural teaching of God's election. This teaching compels us to hand the matter of our salvation over to God and to "fear, love and trust in God above all things," something we sinners find very hard to do. We stumble when we begin to look at ourselves and our own actions as the standard of our salvation. A work-righteous attitude immediately follows, and such an attitude will only breed fear or self-righteousness in our hearts.

But, as Christians, these words are comforting because the Holy Spirit has called us to trust the promises of God and to rely on his mercy alone. When we begin to realize by faith that our salvation is *totally dependent* upon our God and upon his gracious nature, and when we hand the matter of our salvation fully over to our gracious and all-powerful God, then we begin to understand what Paul means when he writes that our salvation is *guaranteed* (Romans 4:16). Our salvation is guaranteed because it is *God's* will and work, not our own! The salvation that our "trembling hands" (CW 199) would quickly surrender is held firmly in the ever-strong and gracious hands of our almighty God.

Nowhere is this profound truth more clearly illustrated and proven than in Scripture's teaching on the doctrine of election. Here we observe God acting independent of us and our actions. Here we see God making us an eternal promise that will not fail. Here we see "God's purpose in election" ensured: "not by works, but by the one calling." *Soli Deo gloria!*

Endnotes

¹ In 1516 Luther commented on his intense, personal difficulty with these chapters (LW 25:389): "Yet here I am issuing the warning that no man whose mind has not yet been purged should rush into these speculations, lest he fall into the abyss of horror and hopelessness; but first let him purge the eyes of his heart in his meditations on the wounds of Jesus Christ. I myself would not even read these things if the order of the lection and necessity did not compel me to do so. For this is very strong wine and the most complete meal, solid food for those who are perfect, that is, the most excellent theology...."

² In addition, Paul also teaches in these chapters that salvation is *sola fide* (Romans 9:30 – 10:13) and *sola scriptura* (Romans 10:14-21). But he starts where salvation necessarily begins: God's free grace. Faith and Scripture follows as a result of that grace.

³ The word that Paul uses here is *κληθήσεται*. This corresponds directly to Genesis 21:12, where Moses uses a form of the verb קרא. God's "calling" or "call" is particularly significant in Scripture's treatment of election. The two concepts are tightly linked. In Romans 8, Paul states that the elect "have been called according to (God's) purpose" (v. 28), and that "those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified" (v. 30). Paul refers to God's calling five times in Romans chapter nine (vv. 7,12,24-26). In 2 Timothy 1:9 Paul states that God "has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose (*προθέσις*) and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time." St. Peter also links the two concepts when he writes that we should be eager to make our "calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10).

⁴ Paul makes much the same point in Galatians 4:21-31. There he writes about the superiority of the promise (gospel) over the law.

⁵ Human reason binds us to automatically suggest that such choices must have some human logic or standard applied to them, otherwise those choices are arbitrary. In the strictest sense of the word, one could perhaps argue that God's election of some to salvation *is*, humanly speaking, arbitrary (i.e. not fixed by law), but it is not capricious. His election is quite purposeful, as we shall see.

⁶ One must remember that God's saying, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated," was spoken within the context of human history (Malachi 1:2,3), and not within the context of eternity. In other words, God did not choose Jacob from eternity because he loved him more than Esau, nor did he judge his decision on the fact that Esau would be rebellious and the father of a rebellious nation. God's eternal election of Jacob over Esau was his independent choice, not based on any comparison between Jacob and Esau. Rather, God is looking *back* over human history when he states, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." Through his prophet Malachi, God is making the point that he has shown his love to Jacob and his people (the Old Testament nation of Israel) by showering them with blessings. But Esau (and the Old Testament nation of Edom) God has not blessed. God says, "I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord." (Malachi 1:3,4). Paul's uses these words from Malachi to show the aftermath of God's eternal choice within history.

⁷ Although, technically speaking, God's decision *was* based on merit, that is, Christ's merit (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9). Christ's merit, however, extended over both Jacob and Esau from eternity; only a rejection of that merit in time condemns (unbelief). So even here there was no difference between the two that, humanly speaking, should have moved God to choose Jacob before Esau. And yet Jacob was chosen based on Christ's merit. Esau was not.

⁸ In his famous treatise, *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther summarized the freedom of God's will this way (LW 33:181):

He is God, and for his will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as a cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God. For it is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens must be right. Cause and reason can be assigned for a creature's will, but not for the will of the Creator, unless you set up over him another creator.

⁹ When this truth is recognized, one can immediately see the destructive implications of an *intuitu fidei* view of election. All of a sudden God's sovereign choice is *not* absolutely free. It is based on a standard, and it is no longer *sola gratia*.

¹⁰ Only in 2 Timothy 3:10 does Paul use *προθέσις* for something other than God's eternal purpose in election. The other examples of Pauline usage are Romans 8:28; Ephesians 1:11; 3:11; and 2 Timothy 1:9.

¹¹ Ephesians 1:10.

¹² William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), p. 244.

¹³ Paul makes this argument, for instance, in Galatians 3:15ff. and 2 Corinthians 3:7ff.

¹⁴ John Ph. Koehler, "Legalism Among Us," *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), Volume II, p. 234.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:181).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁷ Paul is addressing this same attitude in Romans 3:5-8 when he writes:

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say – "Let us do evil that good may result?" Their condemnation is deserved.

¹⁸ In Romans 9:17-18, Paul introduces another example of God's justice, that of Pharaoh. It is interesting to note that in verses 15-18, Paul uses an identical structure: *γὰρ...ἄρα οὖν*. The *γὰρ* ("for") introduces an example in each case: first Moses, then Pharaoh. The *ἄρα οὖν* ("so then") draws a conclusion in each case: that God has mercy on whomever he wants, and that he hardens whomever he wants.

¹⁹ Instances like these make it quite clear what Paul means in Romans 9:6 when he writes: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."

²⁰ Ernst Wendland, *The People's Bible: Exodus* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1984), p. 242.

²¹ This would certainly seem to be Paul's point in quoting this verse as well.

²² Luther comments (LW 15:327f) that in Exodus 33:19 the Lord is saying to Moses,

I will not preach as you, Moses, are obliged to preach. For you must proclaim the Law as follows: "I command you today to do and to observe this and that. If you fail to comply, you will fare badly." I, however, will proclaim that no man can become pious or be saved before the Lord by the Law; for no one keeps the Law as is his duty. Therefore your sermon produces only wretched people; it shows them their sins, on account of which they cannot keep the Law....But My message in the name of the Lord reads: "The Lord wants to do it Himself, and man's own merit and righteousness will count for naught. He who will attain righteousness will do so solely by grace and mercy. He who seeks grace and mercy without advancing his own merit will receive it."

²³ Of that generation, only Caleb and Joshua saw the Promised Land.

²⁴ In his People's Bible commentary on Hebrews (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1986), Pastor Richard Lauersdorf comes to the same conclusion:

Can any reader miss the point? "So we see," the author concludes, "that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief." What robbed that generation of Israel of rest both in the earthly and the heavenly Canaans? The answer is, "Unbelief." Will the consequences be any less severe for those who would turn away from the superior Jesus today? (p. 32). Furthermore we can return to God's initial comments, made *after* he had relented a first time from punishing Israel: "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (Exodus 32:33). This is the first Scriptural reference to the "Book of Life" (cf. Revelation 3:5, et al), and the implication is that God would condemn these people to eternal perdition.

²⁵ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:181).

²⁶ This is not to suggest that God *predetermined* to harden Pharaoh's heart from eternity, thereby making God responsible for the evil Pharaoh committed. But, as we shall discover, Pharaoh's hardening *was* intimately wrapped up in God's purpose in election.

²⁷ John Ph. Koehler, "The Teaching of Scripture Regarding Hardening." *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), Volume II, pp. 198f.

²⁸ Their argument runs this way: if God *hadn't* predestined some for hell, then there would be no reason for Paul to defend God's sovereign choices in the following verses. But since Paul *does* defend God's choices, then they must *need* defending according to human standards of justice.

²⁹ God did not *predetermine* the damnation of any. 1 Timothy 2:4 makes it quite clear that God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." This was God's will even from eternity: that *all* be saved. Then *all* were chosen for salvation, correct? No. "Many are invited, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). Therein lies the conundrum of election, a conundrum that will not be unraveled by human reason. But this point must stand firm: God did not *predestine* anyone to perdition. Instead, damnation is *earned* by a willful rejection of God's faithful promises, namely, unbelief. It is only after this purposeful rejection of God's will and Word that God hardens a person beyond hope of salvation, as we can see from the example of Pharaoh.

³⁰ It is this author's contention that in Romans 9:22 *κατηρτισμένα* is *indeed* a passive form of the participle. However, Paul is not here suggesting that Pharaoh had been prepared for destruction *from eternity* in the same way that believers have been "prepared in advance for glory" (Romans 9:23). The time differential between the temporal *κατηρτισμένα* and the eternal *προητοίμασεν* (Romans 9:23) is obvious when one considers the prefix *προ*. Pharaoh was "prepared for destruction" at the time of God's hardening (Exodus 9:12); believers were "prepared in advance for glory" from all eternity. Paul's point is this: *Pharaoh was a doomed man, and yet God allowed him to live for a purpose: "to show his wrath and make his power known" (9:22)*. To some that may seem cruel, but here Paul defends God's actions. "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common purposes?" (Romans 9:21).

³¹ One thinks, for instance, of the example of Rahab whose faith in God was at first based on the Lord's dealings with Pharaoh: "We have heard how the Loin dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt...When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:10-11).