

# Does Romans 9 Teach Calvinistic Election?

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## INTRODUCTION

When speaking about issues like election, predestination, and human choice, the question, “Is God fair?” inevitably comes up. For centuries, both theologians and laymen have argued whether or not God predestines people to eternal life (or both to eternal life and eternal damnation). Other questions related to this issue are:

“Does God’s election guarantee that people will come to faith in Christ and receive eternal life?”

“How does one reconcile free choice and predestination?”

“If God knows who will accept Him ahead of time, how do we have a choice?”

The answers that we find in Scripture are clearer than many would like to admit. One of those passages that is clearly *not* teaching Calvinistic election is Romans 9. But before we see this passage in more detail, let me briefly treat the four views of *the apparent problem of divine sovereignty*.

## I. THE APPARENT PROBLEM OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY: *Four Views*

—Four Views of Election and Divine Sovereignty

### A. Determinism

1. People are universally unable and unwilling to believe in Christ (doctrine of inability)
2. Faith to believe is a gift of God
3. Regeneration takes place before faith
4. Election is individual; both the elect and non-elect are predestined and the atonement is limited

### B. Compatibilism

1. Most say that people are universally unable and unwilling to believe in Christ (doctrine of inability)
2. Some theologians teach that faith to believe is a gift of God
3. Faith takes place at the same time as regeneration
4. The atonement is unlimited but election is individual; people are responsible for their unbelief

### C. Middle Knowledge

1. People are able but universally unwilling to believe in Christ

2. Faith takes place at the same time as or before regeneration
3. The atonement is unlimited but election is individual (?)
4. However, people are still free to choose

#### D. Indeterminism

1. People are able and some are willing to believe in Christ (free will)
2. Faith to believe is an ability of all (normal) people
3. Faith takes place at the same time as or before regeneration
4. Election is corporate, not individual, but some individuals are chosen to call others that come to faith different than those elected to be mouthpieces of God; people are free to choose (Gen. 12:1-3; Jer. 1:5; Luke 1:13-17; John 15:16; Gal. 1:15-16)

Gen. 12:1 Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Jer. 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations."

Luke 1:13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. <sup>14</sup> And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. <sup>15</sup> For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, "*to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,*" and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

John 15:16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

Gal. 1:15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace,<sup>16</sup> to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood.

Thus, strictly speaking of Romans 9–11, election appears to be of a corporate nature (as will be shown below), not of individuals. Nevertheless, it is a fact shown above that some individuals are chosen to call and persuade others that can come to faith in different manner than those elected to be mouthpieces of God. If God would not pursue (not coerce or force to believe by infusing anything in them) these individuals, then there would be no one to call the rest. Even these individuals that appeared to be pursued by God more than others, like Paul for example, would probably not even come themselves to God and believe in the Messiah, since no one seeks after God (Rom. 3:10-12). Yet, by mercy, he pursues these individuals, who on their own are free to believe or not believe in Jesus for justification of life.

## II. ELECTION DOES NOT GUARANTEE JUSTIFICATION

First, one must concede that God elects some and not others, and He often does not share His rationale for doing so, especially when the predestined person is sinful (Rom. 9:17-23). The following are some men that illustrate the fact that God doesn't share His rationale for choosing sinful humans: ***Abraham, Jacob, Jeremiah, Jesus' disciples, and Paul the apostle.***

Second, however, is the question of whether election guarantees justification or eternal life. Although a number of elect people come to faith and are ultimately justified (as the previously mentioned group demonstrates), Scripture never logically assumes or shows that an elect person (or nation) will always become justified or receive eternal life. Election and justification are not synonyms in Scripture. Hence, being elected does not necessarily result in being justified.

The Greek verbs and noun (*eklegomai, eklogē* or *eklektos*) translated “to choose,” “to elect,” or “election,” occur a total of fifty-one times in the NT. It is neither possible nor necessary to look at all usages here. Examples can be given to show that an elect person or nation is never guaranteed justification. In the OT, God chose the nation of Babylon to discipline Israel (see Habakkuk). Likewise, He chose King Cyrus of Persia to help Israel and to subdue the nations (Cyrus is even called God's “shepherd” and “anointed” in Isa. 44:28 and 45:1). But neither of these sovereign choices proves anything regarding individual or corporate justification.

A famous passage used to support the idea that God predestines people to eternal life is Romans 9. Countless theologians and pastors use this chapter to prove the predestination of individuals to justification that is based on God's choice of Jacob over Esau. But this could not be further from Paul's point.

## III. THE OVERALL AND IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF ROMANS 9–11

Interpretive evidence found in the immediate and overall context Romans 9–11 shows otherwise. We must remember that these chapters are contextually addressed to respond to the Jewish question of why God chose to bless the Gentiles and to abandon Israel, not how God predestines anyone to eternal life (see 9:24-26; 10:19-21; 11:11-36). Thus, Paul’s purpose for writing chapters 9–11 is twofold: (1) To vindicate God for temporarily excluding national Israel from His present plan in light of His promises to the church in 8:28-39, and (2) To curb the arrogance of Gentiles who have received mercy, since Israel in the future will again be grafted into God’s plan. Paul’s answer covers God’s dealing with Israel’s past (9:1-29), present (9:30–10:21), and future (11).

Having the overall context in mind helps us see and understand better and more accurately the immediate context why God chose Jacob over Esau. The issue here is God’s sovereign choice to make and bless one nation above another: Jacob (representing Israel) over Esau (representing the Edomite Gentiles). But this choice does not guarantee that everyone belonging to a certain group will be justified. Clearly, all Israelites are not heaven-bound and neither are all Gentiles. This choice, nevertheless, proves God’s right to choose, which was not influenced by anyone. Hence, before the children were even born, or had done any good or evil, God chose. God makes this clear by going against the cultural norm of the day where the younger would serve the older. Instead, His sovereign choice in the matter was that, “The older shall serve the younger” (Gen 25:23).

**Gen. 25:23** And the LORD said to her:  
 “Two nations *are* in your womb,  
 Two peoples shall be separated from your body;  
*One* people shall be stronger than the other,  
 And the older shall serve the younger.”

Hence, the Edomite descendants of Esau served the Israelite descendants of Jacob (1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:14; 1 Kgs 11:15-16; 22:47). Please, note one important detail that eludes those that interpret the choosing of Jacob over Esau and Isaac over Ishmael to mean God predetermines who will receive eternal life (or justification) rather than choosing a person that represents a nation (and people) for service. The two people here being contrasted are not just brothers, but they are brothers who represent in contrast either the Hebrews (Jacob and Isaac) or the Gentiles (Esau and Ishmael). Why is this important? Well, if individual election to justification is the point, why not contrast Reuben with Simeon or Peter with Judas Iscariot (who is clearly not justified but, interesting enough, chosen directly by Jesus, see John 6:70)? That’s because both of these contrasts are juxtaposing an Israelite with another Israelite and defeats the point Paul makes for penning the entire section to vindicate God of reneging His promises to Israel and to argue that God has not abandoned the Israelite nation (represented by Jacob and Isaac) who he called initially to service rather than the

Gentile nations (represented by Esau and Ishmael).

Through God's choice Jacob receives the blessing. Although individuals are free to choose or reject God, being sinful they reject Him (Rom. 3:10-12, 23), unless God reaches out to them first. But that was an issue already addressed by Paul in the wrath, condemnation, and justification section of Rom. 1:18–4:25, not here. Although God elects Israel and rigorously pursues them by grace, He does not coerce anyone in the nation to believe in the Messiah who guarantees them eternal life (which is the reason they found themselves in this predicament). Individuals have an option to receive or reject Jesus Christ for eternal life, or else how could anyone make sense of Paul's point regarding Israel in Rom. 9:33–10:4? In other words, is God not blaming Israel for their rejection? Of course He is, but if they could not of their own will be able to believe because they needed help from God by being infused with the "gift of faith" or be "regenerate before they can believe" could God be fair in blaming them? No. What He really should have said here is, "You rejected the Messiah, the chief corner stone, because I did not chose to give you faith or regenerate you prior to being able to belief." But this is not found here or anywhere in the entire Bible. One would think that for this being such a popular doctrine in certain circles and forcefully argued that it would permeate all of Scripture. But it does not. What God does show in Scripture is that He seeks after people through many avenues; but when God's conviction confronts the individual, we are left on our own to *receive* or *reject* Jesus, and by default, the message of eternal life that He alone can furnish, since He's the only one whose sacrifice was acceptable to God and was proven by rising from the dead.

#### **IV. GOD ELECTS FOR SERVICE, NOT SALVATION**

Although God secures the eternal destiny of those within the elect who believe (OT saints believed in the coming Messiah for eternal life), the main point here is a sovereign choice to separate a group of people for His service, in order that they preach justification and bring about the salvation of the nations (Rom. 11:25-36).

Hence, God's choice of Jacob (Israel) over Esau (Edom) represents national election, as seen in Mal 1:2-3, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." The term hated here is an idiom understood as loving less (Gen. 29:30-31; Matt. 6:24; Luke 14:26; John 12:25). The two concepts of love and hate here are not to be viewed as feelings but a decision God took to bestow His mercy on Jacob's, not Esau's, descendants. Paul's point here is to show that God remained true to His electing purpose in passing judgment on Esau's descendants, the Edomites, who rightly deserved it. Instead, He had mercy on Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, who also rightly deserved judgment, but received grace (unmerited favor). Thus, since God's electing purposes and promises to Israel (Rom. 9:6b) cannot fail, this should put their worries to rest, which was the point that gave rise to this entire section (Romans 9–11).

Also, as a result of God choosing Isaac over Ishmael (Rom. 9:7-9), and then choosing Jacob over Esau (vv. 10-13), the question of God's fairness naturally arises: Is there unrighteousness with God? Paul strongly replies: Certainly not! (cf. Rom. 3:4; 6:1). The issue here is not God's justice but His sovereign choice to have mercy on those He elects to serve Him in some specific task. He has mercy on whomever He wills, as He indicated to Moses (Exod. 33:19). Therefore, it really does not depend on man's conduct (i.e., "not of him who wills, nor of him who runs"), but is solely based on God who shows mercy. God is not unfair to choose one over another since His choice is based strictly on mercy; rather, we should wonder why God chooses anyone to serve Him (since He doesn't need anyone). Election is clearly unto service for Him. In fact, Israel was chosen to call others (Gentile nations) to God's blessings (Gen. 12:3; 18:18-19; Exod. 9:14, 16, 29; Ps. 72:17; Jer. 4:2), which they failed to do, and therefore incurred God's curses (Deut. 28:15–29:28).

## **V. GOD ELECTS TO CALL OTHERS TO BLESSINGS**

We must always keep in mind that contextually God's choice to have mercy on one nation over another has nothing to do with selecting individuals to justification, but to call others to blessings. Romans 9 clearly refers to earthly privileges and promised blessings that include the preaching of the message of eternal life. God's bypassing of Ishmael and Esau does not mean they could not be eternally saved. However, those that form part of spiritual Israel, who inherit the promises of God (cf. 9:5), are the elect that also place their faith in Christ and who become blessed and have the responsibility to call others to these blessings. Although Romans 9–11 refers to the historical destiny of different nations and not individual salvation, Paul is obviously concerned for every Israelite's justification (Rom. 2:1–4:25; 9:1-6, 30-33; 10:1-4; 11:26-27). However, the issue here is calling a nation to blessings in order to share those blessings with others. But since they failed, God saw fit to elect another group called the Church (composed largely of Gentiles) to accomplish this task (11:11-25). Fortunately for Israel, because God is gracious He will again return to them and fulfill His promises and plans (11:23-32). How incredible is God (11:33-36)?

## **CONCLUSION: *Does Romans 9 Teach Calvinistic Election? NO!***

So is God fair? Absolutely. In fact, He is the standard by which we measure fairness. However, the content of Romans 9–11 is not concerned with His fairness in terms of eternal destinies of individuals, but with the amazing grace and mercy He has shown in choosing us to serve Him.