Two Views of Romans 9

Chapters 9-11 of Romans form a cohesive argument that brings the first 11 chapters to a climax. Calvinists consider Romans 9 to be the bedrock upon which the doctrine of unconditional election firmly stands. While there are many passages of Scripture that address divine election (see *Election and Reprobation*), none speaks as forcefully as Romans 9. But does this chapter speak of election to *salvation* or to *service*? And does it address *individuals* or *nations*? Calvinists and Arminians come to different conclusions based on their understanding of one of the most magnificent chapters in the Bible.

There is widespread agreement that Romans 9 is addressing the righteousness of God as stated in Paul's question in verse 14: "What should we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not!" In other words, has God been unjust in His dealings with Israel? This question arises because of three facts, according to Jack W. Cottrell:

- God has chosen Israel to be His special people and has showered them with unparalleled blessings (Rom. 9:4-5).
- The Jews assume that their special relationship with God carries with it an implicit promise of salvation for practically every Israelite.
- Most Jews are in fact lost (Rom. 1-8).

Paul knows that in view of these three facts, the question of God's righteousness in His dealings with the Jews will arise. Says Cottrell, "Though most agree that everything Paul is doing in Romans 9-11 is designed to establish this point [that the word of God has not failed], there is strong disagreement concerning how these chapters show that God's promises to Israel have not failed. All agree that the theme of divine election is the main point, but the disagreement is over the *nature* of this election. Specifically, is Paul talking about election to *salvation* or election to *service?*" (*Perspectives on Election: 5 Views,* pp. 122-23)

The Reformed View

Calvinists argue that in Romans 9 Paul is teaching the unconditional election of some people to salvation – and for some Calvinists, the unconditional reprobation of all others to hell. Why are some Jews saved and others lost? The answer is that it is simply a matter of God's sovereign choice. As John Piper explains it, "Does election in Rom. 9:1-23 concern nations or individuals? And does it concern historical roles or eternal destinies? . . . The evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the view that Paul's concern is for the *eternal* destinies of those *within* the nation of Israel who are saved and who are accursed" (*The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23,* pp. 15, 71).

The Arminian View

Arminians view this chapter differently. They argue that Paul is not distinguishing between two groups *within* Israel, the saved and the lost. Rather, he is speaking of two Israels – ethnic Israel and spiritual Israel. Despite what the Jews commonly thought, ethnic Israel was chosen for

service, while spiritual Israel, a subset of the Jewish race, was chosen for *salvation*. God's covenant promises to these two groups are not the same. As Cottrell explains, "The terms of the covenant God made with Abraham and later with Israel as a whole did not include a promise to save *anyone* simply because he or she was a member of the covenant people. The key promise God made to Abraham and his seed was this: 'In you all the families of the earth will be blessed' (Gen. 12:3 NASB), a promise that was fulfilled when 'the Christ according to the flesh' ultimately came from Israel (Rom. 9:5 NASB)" (Cottrell, p. 126).

A Closer Look at Romans 9:1-24

Verses 1-5: Israel's rejection of Christ

1 I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience is testifying to me with the Holy
Spirit—2 that I have intense sorrow and continual anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I
myself were cursed and cut off from the Messiah for the benefit of my brothers, my countrymen
by physical descent. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the
covenants, the giving of the law, the temple service, and the promises. 5 The forefathers are
theirs, and from them, by physical descent, came the Messiah, who is God over all, blessed
forever. Amen.

- Calvinists generally conclude that the benefits listed in verses 4-5 have saving implications for Israel, but God has chosen unconditionally to apply these saving benefits to *some*, not all, Jews.
- Arminians respond that none of these blessings involves a promise of eternal life for individual members of the Jewish race. Rather, these benefits involve God's election of ethnic Israel for service in proclaiming to the world the truth of the one true and living God and to be the people through whom the Messiah would come (Gen. 12:3; Rom. 9:5).

Verses 6-13: God's gracious election of Israel

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are
Israel. 7 Neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants. On the contrary,
in Isaac your seed will be called. 8 That is, it is not the children by physical descent who are
God's children, but the children of the promise are considered seed. 9 For this is the statement of
the promise: **At this time I will come, and Sarah will have a son.** 10 And not only that, but also
when Rebekah became pregnant by Isaac our forefather 11 (for though they had not been born yet
or done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to election might stand, 12 not
from works but from the One who calls) she was told: **The older will serve the younger.** 13 As it
is written: **Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.**

- Calvinists understand these verses to show how God unconditionally chose to save some Israelites but not others. Just as God distinguished between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau, He unconditionally elected some Jews for salvation and bypassed the rest. Hyper-Calvinists appeal to verse 13 to posit that God hates the non-elect and chooses them for hell.
- Arminians respond that these verses are not speaking of salvation, but of ethnic Israel and how it came into being in the first place. For example, in verse 10, Paul is not referring to Jacob the individual, but to the nation that later bore his name. Paul's quotation in verse 12 of Gen. 25:23 makes this clear: "Two *nations* are in your womb; two people will

[come] from you and be separated. One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." Even more telling is verse 13, in which God's love of Jacob and hatred of Esau is not before these men were born but long after they died. Paul cites Mal. 1:2-3, written about 1,600 years after Jacob and Esau lived; the purpose is to show that God hated the Edomites as a nation because they mistreated the Jews (see Numbers 20:14-21). Even so, there are *individual* Edomites and neighboring Moabites counted among believers (Ruth 1; Amos 9:12; Rev. 7:9), so Paul cannot be addressing salvation in these verses in Romans 9.

Verses 14-24: God's election is just

14 What should we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not! 15 For He tells Moses: **I will show mercy to whom I show mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.** 16 So then it does not depend on human will or effort, but on God who shows mercy. 17 For the Scripture tells Pharaoh: **For this reason I raised you up: so that I may display My power in you, and that My name may be proclaimed in all the earth.** 18 So then, He shows mercy to whom He wills, and He hardens whom He wills. 19 You will say to me, therefore, "Why then does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?" 20 But who are you—anyone who talks back to God? Will what is formed say to the one who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" 21 Or has the potter no right over His clay, to make from the same lump one piece of pottery for honor and another for dishonor? 22 And what if God, desiring to display His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath ready for destruction? 23 And [what if] He did this to make known the riches of His glory on objects of mercy that He prepared beforehand for glory—24 on us whom He also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

- Calvinists point to verses 15-18 as clear statements of God's sovereign right to choose whom He will for salvation and to harden the hearts of whom He will for His purposes. Hyper-Calvinists argue that Pharoah had no real choice in the matter. Paul quotes Ex. 33:19 (in verse 15) and Ex. 9:16 (in verse 17) to show that our salvation "does not depend on human will or effort, but on God who shows mercy" (verse 16). As for verses 19-22, Calvinists say Paul clearly communicates God's irresistible power in salvation, choosing whom He will for heaven and whom He will for hell. Who are we – anyone – to question God's sovereign purpose in election? Hyper-Calvinists point to verse 21 as an illustration of God's deterministic – even fatalistic – will in election and reprobation. Verses 22-24 show, at least in part, that God's purpose in election is to display the full range of His glory, from wrath to mercy. As such, His election to salvation and reprobation is both unconditional and just.
- Regarding verses 15-18, Arminians respond that God did not harden Pharoah's heart contrary to Pharoah's own free choice (see for example Ex. 7:13-14; 8:15; 8:32); even strong Calvinists like R.C. Sproul agree that God did not harden Pharoah's heart actively, but only passively in the sense of giving him up to his own sinful desires (*Chosen by God*, pp. 144-46). Further, the Hebrew word for "hardened" (*chazaq*) often means "strengthen" (Judges 3:12, 16:28 NASB) or even "encourage" (Deut. 1:38, 3:28 NASB) in Scripture; taken in this sense, God in His mercy allowed Pharoah to continue in his stubborn rebellion until the fullness of God's wrath was displayed in the tenth plague.

Concerning verses 19-22, Arminians point out that the phrase, "For who can resist His will?" is not an affirmation by Paul but a question from an objector. Paul's response ("But who are you – anyone who talks back to God?") implies that the objector is resisting God by his very question. More importantly, the direct implication is that if God's will truly is irresistible, then no one should be blamed. Finally, as Norman Geisler points out, "even if one could show that God is working here (1) irresistibly, (2) on individuals, (3) for eternal salvation – all of which are doubtful – it would not follow necessarily that He works irresistibly on the unwilling. Indeed … God does not force free creatures to love Him. Forced love is both morally and logically absurd" (*Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election,* p. 92). In verses 21-22, the Hebrew mind would not see the parable of the potter from Jeremiah 18 as being deterministic, for in this context the lump of clay will either be built up or torn down by God depending on Israel's moral response to Him (see Jer. 18:8). The image here is national, not individual; a repentant Israel is a beautiful vessel of honor, while an unrepentant nation is a vessel of His wrath. Finally, in verses 23-24, Paul shows that Gentile believers share a common election with spiritual Israel – a glorious display of God's loving kindness toward those who believe. In summary, God's sovereignty in election includes the prerogative of choosing and using the nation of Israel without saving all Jews.

Conclusion:

In Romans 9 Paul deals with the question of why *all* Jews are not saved. A careful reading of this chapter in context seems to support the view that Paul's answer has less to do with unconditional election to salvation than with the fact that the promise of salvation was never made to the *nation* of Israel in the first place. Therefore, no one may accuse God of unrighteousness if many Jews are lost, even though this fact grieves Paul (Rom. 9:1-3).

At the same time, God has sovereignly elected certain Jews – "spiritual Israel" – to salvation, as well as certain Gentiles, as other passages of Scripture make clear. Romans 9, like the rest of this great letter, exalts the power and wisdom of God in carrying out His purpose to redeem lost sinners through the election of ethnic Israel to service and spiritual Israel to salvation. Spiritual Israel is saved the same way all others are – by faith (Rom. 10:9-10, 13).

Next week: Are people truly free?