

Regarding Romans Chapter 9

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A polite student from a Reformed Theology college wrote to me telling me that he believed in free will but he had a hard time getting past Romans 9, especially “*The whole ...some vessels were created for destruction while others were created for worthy purposes...I can't shake that, how is that not election/predestination?*”

Norman Geisler wrote in *When Critics Ask*, “Regarding unclear passages, one should always use the clear passage of scripture to interpret unclear ones.”

To restate Geisler, I would further add, rather than taking one verse or one chapter from the Bible and basing doctrine on just that, one should consider the entirety of the Bible to explain individual passages and not use the difficult passages to explain the entirety of the Bible.

In Romans, particularly Chapter 9, Paul is explaining to the Jews how God could accept the Gentiles and reject part of the nation of Israel. This was a hard concept for God's “Chosen People.” So Romans 9 is dealing primarily with the nation of Israel.

In the New American Standard Bible (NASB) the heading of Chapter 9 says “*Solicitude for Israel.*” *Merriam-Webster* defines *Solicitude* as:

- 1 a : the state of being concerned and anxious b : attentive care and protectiveness; also : an attitude of earnest concern or attention
- 2 : a cause of care or concern -- usually used in plural

J. Vernon McGee's *Thru The Bible* says the theme of Romans Chapter 9 is: “Israel defined; Israel identified; the choice of Israel in the sovereign purpose of God; the choice of Gentiles in the scriptural prophecies.” McGee writes of the section of Romans containing Chapters 9 through 11 “it deals with the eschatological, that is, the prophetic, section of the Bible that reveals God is not through with Israel....Now as we begin chapter 9, notice that this has to do with God's past dealings with Israel. In chapter 10 we will see God's present dealings with Israel and, in chapter 11, God's future dealings with Israel as a nation...”

What is being described is selection for “*service*” not “*salvation.*” God was talking about forming clay (Israel) to be used to bring the Messiah into the world.

John Wesley writes of Romans 9:

In this chapter St. Paul, after strongly declaring his love and esteem for them [the Jews/Israel], sets himself to answer the grand objection of his countrymen; namely, that the rejection of the Jews and reception of the gentiles was contrary to the word of God. That he had not here the least thought of personal election or reprobation is manifest,

1. Because it lay quite wide of his design, which was this, to show that God's rejecting the Jews and receiving the gentiles was consistent with his word

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2. Because such a doctrine would not only have had no tendency to convince, but would have evidently tended to harden, the Jews;

3. Because when he sums up his argument in the close of the chapter, he has not one word, or the least intimation, about it.

Source:

<http://www.biblestudytools.net/Commentaries/WesleysExplanatoryNotes/wes.cgi?book=ro&chapter=009> also
<http://eword.gospelcom.net/comments/romans/wesley/romans9.htm>

Calvinists use the 9th chapter of Romans as proof of God's predestining some for salvation and some for hell and use Paul's illustrations in this chapter to prove their point:

- God loving Jacob and hating Esau
- Hardening Pharaoh's Heart
- Clay in the Hands of God

God loving Jacob and hating Esau

In Hebrew the word that is translated into English as "*hate*" can also mean "*love less*" or "*put in second place*." See Genesis 29:31, Deuteronomy 21:15, and Luke 14:26. [Source: *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus: Insight from His Jewish Context* by David Bivin. Published by the En-Gedi Resource Center, Inc. 2005]

'Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."' Romans 9:13
taken from Malachi 1:2-3 *I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.*

God's choice of Jacob had nothing to do with salvation, but rather with who would be the father of the nation of Israel.

Billy Graham's magazine *Decision* once covered this particular verse. The article said in English "*love*" and "*hate*" are primarily words of emotion. However, the Hebrew words so translated in this passage have a meaning different from what we might expect. The Hebrew verb translated "*love*" means having a positive relationship. The Hebrew word for "*hate*" indicates a non-relationship, or a negative relationship.

The statement might be paraphrased and explained thus: "I offered Jacob a positive relationship with Me and he accepted it, so he enjoys everything that the relationship implies; I offered the same positive relationship to Esau, but he rejected it, so he can expect nothing that is brought by a positive relationship."

Another way to look at the words *hate* and *love* is they could have been used more for contrast and emphasis. Take for example the following:

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"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sisters –yes, even his own life –he cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:26

Is God saying we should actually hate our parents, wife or our children (or ourselves)? No, God is contrasting how great our love for Him should be in comparison to our love for our family.

Of course God doesn't want us to hate our parents and He does not contradict Himself. Hating your parents would violate the 5th Commandment:

"Honor your father and your mother" Exodus 20:12

and it would also contradict Jesus when He spoke to the Pharisees and teachers of the law:

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father ' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition." Matthew 15:3-6

Also, the writer of Hebrews tells us Esau was rejected because he rejected his birthright for a morsel of food. Esau was more interested in his stomach than his relationship with God:

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. Hebrews 12:14-17

Genesis 25:34 states *"Esau despised his birthright."*

The other point to remember here is Jacob and Esau are being discussed not only as individuals but as nations. Keep in mind what was being described was not *salvation* but *service* and *inheritance*. To verify this point go back to Genesis and read the account of the birth of Jacob and Esau:

Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

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When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.

Genesis 25:21-25

When you read the whole Genesis account of Jacob and Esau you see Esau never had much interest in his birthright. As far as Jacob stealing Esau's blessing, that has nothing to do with his salvation.

Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

*Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. **Romans 9:17-18***

In *Thru The Bible Commentary on Exodus* J. Vernon McGee (www.ttb.org) writes:

The hardening is a figurative word, which can mean twisting, as with a rope. It means God twisted the heart of Pharaoh. He was going to squeeze out what was in it. God forced him to do the thing he really wanted to do. God's part in this was to bring to the surface that which was already there...

And in *Thru The Bible Commentary on Luke* McGee writes:

...There is an old familiar illustration which says that the same sun will melt the wax but harden the clay. It is the character of, or the condition of, the element and not the sun that melts the wax and hardens the clay. God is not going to harden you. He did not harden Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh already possessed a hard heart, and God only brought that fact out into the open...

Even if you accept that God specifically made Pharaoh do something he might not have done otherwise that has nothing to do with salvation but rather it has to do with causing action for a specific task.

If God had not *compelled* Pharaoh to do what was already in his heart, or if God had not *forced* Pharaoh to do what God wanted him to do, God would have *found someone else*. The Book of Esther offers a good example.

In the Book of Esther, Esther's uncle Mordecai told her (through Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs) to go to the king and plead with him for the Jews so that they would not be destroyed. To this Esther replied, through the eunuch to her uncle, that it would be death for her if she did as her uncle told her. She also indicated that even though she was a Jew she was in a protected group and she feared to jeopardize that protected position.

Mordecai replied:

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"...Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" **Esther 4:13-14**

What Mordecai was saying is God put Esther in that place for a reason and that she had free will to refuse to be obedient and even if she refused God would work through someone else. In the end Esther did as her uncle directed and both she and the Jews were saved from destruction and were blessed.

This is similar somewhat to the story of Jonah. In the Book of Jonah God directed Jonah to go to Nineveh to warn the Ninevites that if they didn't repent and follow God that they would be destroyed. Jonah thought the Ninevites deserved to be destroyed and refused to follow God's direction by sailing away in a different direction. In the end God did get Jonah's attention and he resentfully obeyed.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. **Jonah 1:1-3**

So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. **Jonah 3:5**

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. **Jonah 3:10**

Later after the Ninevites repented:

...But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" Then the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" **Jonah 4:1-4**

So we see that initially Jonah refused and God took extraordinary action to get his attention. Even if Jonah had continued to be disobedient and refused to go, God would have raised someone else up, just as Mordecai told Esther that if she refused God would use someone else. Note that, while God had a plan for service for Jonah and Esther God did not create either of them to automatically and obediently hop up and say "Yes sir, right away sir!!" God wanted them to do what He told them to do, but they still had a choice. God put pressure on Jonah and he chose to yield. Esther did not need so much persuasion.

Oftentimes people interpret what's being described in the Bible as referring to "salvation" when

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in reality it is describing "service." God chose some for certain service and for others He may have planned for greater or lesser service. Again, Esther and Jonah bear this out.

One last thought on doing or not doing what God has planned for us. It is possible for us to do what God never intended (basically isn't that sin?):

*This is what the LORD says...For they have forsaken me ...They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal--something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. **Jeremiah 19:1-5** (also see Jeremiah 7:30-31)*

Clay in the Hands of God

*Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? **Romans 9:21** King James Version*

Also:

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?

*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? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory-- even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? **Romans 9:20-24** NIV*

If you look up the words from the King James Bible in a Greek/Hebrew lexicon you'll see the language of Romans 9:21 indicates that the KJV word for "dishonor" is rendered "common household use" as opposed to something used for more "noble" purposes.

The context of this passage is not describing the fact that God creates some to be dishonorable or damned but that some people are used in more common ways and some are used in other ways.

The point is that God sovereignly chooses how He wants us to be used by giving us gifts, ministries, passions, opportunities, etc. If God wants to make us rich, powerful, or influential, He has the right. If God wants to make us a common servant, He has that right too.

Paul is quoting Isaiah 29 and 45 and using the imagery of Jeremiah 18 at the Potter's house where God shapes the pot as it seems best to Him. Paul is noting that in our sin we miss the point (relationship over religion). He summarizes his case in vs. 30-33 by noting that the religious Jews were lost vs. the non-religious Gentiles were saved...all by faith vs. works.

Those who reject God are the *objects of wrath* who by their own actions are heading for judgment. Destruction is the penalty for rejecting God. The Bible tells us that God is long

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suffering and patient. This is evident in the Old Testament and Paul notes it here as well. *Objects of mercy* are those who love God, and the Bible tells us from the beginning He had a plan for those who love Him and follow Him, just as He has a plan for those who reject Him.

J. Vernon McGee suggests that "the 'vessels of wrath' are the Jewish nation, which was destroyed in A.D. 70. Jesus, you recall, announced this destruction, but He wept over the city, and he prayed, ". . . Father, forgive them . . ." (Luke 23:34). When the final judgment came in A.D. 70, God saved a remnant. These were "vessels of mercy."

In conclusion, as I said before, Paul was explaining to the Jews that if God wanted to use and save the Gentiles that God in His sovereignty had that right. In order to understand what God is saying through Paul one has to read what is before and what is after chapter 9 to get the big picture. Rather than taking one passage from Romans one must look up specific words to see what they originally meant and also what they meant in context of what was being discussed and to whom it was being addressed. You have to consider the entirety of God's word and not just certain passages or chapters.

When put in Biblical and historical context there is nothing in Romans 9 for those in the Calvinist or Reformed Theology camps to justify their doctrine of predestination.

Also see Dave Hunt's response to *Does Romans 9 Teach Calvinism?* At <http://www.thebereancall.org/node/1098>