

“God’s Mysterious Judgment and Mercy”

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and let’s meet in Romans 9...

Last week we explored the subject of the “hardening” of Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. We saw how the language varies between Exodus 4 and 14 in terms of agency. Sometimes God is said to be the one actively hardening Pharaoh’s heart, sometimes Pharaoh acts on his own heart, and sometimes the actor is left unstated. I labored to show that the common assumption that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart only after he hardens himself, does not adequately account for what we find in the text. It’s not that simple. We are left with some mystery and forced to maintain that in some sense both God and Pharaoh were responsible for the hardening (or at least some aspect of it).

And yet the narrator would have us conclude that all of this is happening according to God’s purpose and plan. Never once does it speak of God’s hardening of Pharaoh as a response to Pharaoh’s self-hardening. It’s always tied instead to the intention of God Himself. As Proverbs 21:1 says, “*The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*” Pharaoh is case in point. But, as I was careful to state last week, this does not make God responsible for Pharaoh’s sin. Pharaoh is responsible for his own sinful choices and the consequences they bring. How the divine intention and the man’s intention hold together is much more complicated and mysterious than many people would have us believe.

We would be remiss, however, to speak about the hardening of Pharaoh and not pause to consider what Paul says about it Romans 9. But to do so puts us in some very challenging waters yet again. We are not always dealing with such complicated matters on a Sunday mornings, so if you are a guest with us, don’t fear. Every sermon is not like this. But today will stretch our minds a bit. It will also frustrate our minds, because we don’t have a lot of time and we are dealing with subjects that have literally birthed libraries of literature over the centuries. These things are debated for good reason. We can’t cover every angle in a short sermon, so cut a preacher a little slack, will ya? I’m just offering you some food for thought. You’ll have to wrestle with these things in your own time, with your Bible open, for years to come. And I confess that we will state more mysteries than we will solve today.

We’ll pick things up mid-thought, where Paul is anticipating objections to what he has previously written. He addresses those objections through a series of rhetorical questions. I’ll start in verse 24...

“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!¹⁵ For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.¹⁹ You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory

for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:14-24)

In the context of Roman 9 we are dealing “*God’s purpose of election*” (9:11). Election is a word that means “choice” and in theology it refers to God’s choice in our salvation. When we are dealing with topics like predestination and election strong opinions and emotions come into play.¹ Not surprisingly, this section in Romans has been understood in very different ways by interpreters of different theological persuasions. Since usually this conversation is framed as a debate between Arminianism and Calvinism, let’s begin there. For the sake of time, I’ll have to speak in generalities a bit. But you need to understand that there are variations of thought within each camp.

Very often proponents of each are reacting against fringe elements on the other side of the aisle, not the more mainstream or historical expression of the views. That’s one of the reasons there is often such vitriol spewed at people from both sides of the divide. It’s saddening. It’s shameful at times. I believe that mainstream Calvinism and mainstream Arminianism are well within the bounds of orthodox Christianity. We are brothers and sisters, even if we disagree on some of the finer and secondary points of theology. Members of both sides often demonize the other as though they were not serious students of the God’s Word. And, of course, the irony is that often these passionate advocates within both camps have not even read the writings of John Calvin or Jacob Arminius themselves. They only know them as they have been represented by someone else. Perhaps more charity would be extended if attention was given to those primary sources. It may surprise many of you that Arminius famously wrote the following about Calvin,

“After the Holy Scriptures, I exhort the students to read the Commentaries of Calvin. . . . I tell them that he is incomparable in the interpretation of Scripture; and that his Commentaries ought to be held in greater estimation than all that is delivered to us in the writings of the ancient Christian Fathers: so that, in a certain eminent spirit of prophecy, I give the preeminence to him beyond most others, indeed beyond them all. I add that, with regard to what belongs to common places, his *Institutes* must be read after the Catechism, as a more ample interpretation. But to all this I subjoin the remark, that they must be perused with cautious choice, like all other human compositions.”²

Oh how the tone has shifted. . . . To our detriment, I might add. That is not to say that Arminius agreed with everything in Calvin’s writings. Nor should he. I certainly don’t. But the rhetoric was much more cautious, muted, and humble than it is in our day. I wish both sides could learn from this example.

Now then, about those generalizations I spoke of. Keeping in mind the caveats I have mentioned, generally speaking, when it comes to the doctrine of election, Arminians believe that God’s choice of who to save (i.e., his election) is based on God looking ahead in time and knowing who will choose to have faith in Christ for their salvation. In other words, God chooses those whom He knows will one day choose Him.³ If that is true, then it influences how you read these verses. Some Arminians argue that these verses in Romans 9 are indeed talking about salvation of individual but nothing in the passage would rule out the possibility that the saving choice of God was based on this foreseen faith. Other Arminians deny that this passage is even talking about individual salvation.

Calvinists, on the other hand, generally argue that that God’s choice in our salvation is not based on some foreseen choice on our part, but rather on God’s actual choice to extend grace to specific individuals (the elect). They believe that fallen humanity, corrupted by sin, never chooses God (cf. Romans 3:9-12). That doesn’t mean fallen humans aren’t free to choose what they desire. They are free in that sense. But they just don’t desire God and will not believe on Christ unless first regenerated, which requires a gift of God’s grace. In other words, “the elect choose Christ, but only because they were first chosen by God.”⁴ And that divine choice was based on God’s free decision and not based on anything a person may or may not do. As

Augustine (who is sometime regarded as the forerunner of Calvinism) put it, “God does not choose us because we believe, but that we may believe.”⁵ If this is true, then it has an impact on how one reads Romans 9.⁶

Now at this point members of both sides begin lobbing bombs at one another (and it gets pretty nasty). “Well you must not believe that God is loving because your view is incompatible with a God of love.” “Not it’s not!” “Yes it is!” “Your view turns God into a contingent being, a mere reactionary.” “No it doesn’t!” “Yes it does.” “Well, your view turns humanity into a bunch of robots who don’t have a choice in the matter.” “No it doesn’t!” “Yes it does!” “You guys don’t really understand what the biblical word for ‘foreknowledge’ means and how it’s used.” “Yes we do!” “No you don’t!” “You guys are a bunch of crazies.” “Why, you stuck up, dim-witted, scruffy looking Nerfherder!”⁷ And round and round they go.

In truth, both sides are raising legitimate concerns at points. And both sides historically have offered some sophisticated answers. The ins and outs of that debate go beyond the scope of this sermon. Suffice it to say, there is a good reason these things have been debated. But one of the issues at the heart of this discussion relates to God’s nature as a loving God. That’s an important issue in this discussion, worth pausing to consider. In reality the “love of God” cuts both ways in this debate. And there’s the rub. And it’s also at this point that members of both persuasions make the same mistake, it seems to me. Let me explain.

In a wonderful book called, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, D. A. Carson helps us see the multifaceted ways the Bible speaks of God’s love.⁸ It’s an excellent book that I can’t possibly do it justice with just a few remarks today. He has some helpful insights on how our cultural environment influences how we think of the love of God. But one of the most helpful sections, in my estimation, is where he distinguishes between five different ways the Bible speaks about the love of God. I have time to merely mention them for your consideration and offer a few thoughts related to our topic.

1. **God’s Intra-Trinitarian Love** (expressed between the persons of the Trinity).⁹
2. **God’s Providential Love** (expressed toward all that He has made).¹⁰
3. **God’s Yearning and Salvific Love** (expressed in his stance toward sinners).¹¹
4. **God’s Love for His Elect** (expressed in particular, effective, selecting ways towards some).¹²
5. **God’s Conditional Love** (expressed toward His people but seemingly conditioned on their obedience).¹³

All of these are expressions of the love of God. They flow from His nature. But they are not all identical expressions. Some seem universal (like the yearning of His salvific love). Some seem discriminating (like His electing love). Some seem unconditional (like His providential love) and other conditional (like those passages that tied to obedience). All of these expressions of God’s love are well attested in Scripture. All of them, therefore, should be affirmed and held with the appropriate balance that Scripture provides. But that doesn’t always happen when people talk about the love of God. Very often one of these expressions is elevated in our minds to the exclusion of the others or elevated as the grid that controls the others to the point that the other ways of speaking of God’s love are more or less relativized. In other words, we tend to fixate on one to the exclusion or distortion of the others.

This is where Calvinists and Arminians (at least some of them) often make the same mistake. Some Calvinists will hold up those passages that speak of the particular love that extends only to His people to the exclusion of other passages and they come off as callous jerks or worse give the impression that God is one. Arminians naturally gravitate to those passages that speak of God’s more universal love and saving yearnings and some of their number do so in a way that does injustice to some the other expressions of God’s love. In short, people on both sides of the debate often make the same mistake, just in different directions.

But what are we to make of those passages that point to the fact that God doesn't desire for anyone to perish (e.g., 2 Peter 3:9) or that He does desire for all to be saved (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:4). Well some Calvinists jump through some exegetical hoops and attempt to argue that even those passages are speaking of only the elect. While that may work with some verses, it doesn't work with all of them (e.g., Ezekiel 18:23). It seems better to just take those verses at face value. God desires, in some sense, for all to be saved and none to perish. This is something that many Calvinists and Arminians can agree on. But that raises a challenge for both groups. If, on the one hand, God desires all sinners to be saved, then why, on the other hand, when God is all-powerful and can show mercy to anyone does He not extend saving mercy to everyone?¹⁴

Here again the Calvinists and Arminians make the exact same logical move, but in different directions. Since God desires for all to be saved and yet He doesn't save all, when He could, that can only mean that there is something that God desires even more than He desires to save all.¹⁵ Both Calvinists¹⁶ and Arminians¹⁷ agree on this. Where they disagree, as you'd expect, is on that which God desires more. So what does God desire more than saving everyone?

The Arminians say that God desires to be chosen freely, so He doesn't interfere with the human will (except perhaps to make self-determination possible), so that all people can freely choose to have a relationship with Him through faith in Christ. So they elevate human self-determination (freedom of choice) as the answer to why God doesn't save everyone. He desires to preserve our freedom, that's why.

The Calvinists take a different approach. They argue that God desires to glorify Himself above all else (including saving everyone) and that He has decided that the best way for Him to manifest His glory is not simply through His mercy but also through His judgment.¹⁸ His glory is best seen, in a fallen world, through both.

Exploring the merits and demerits of both claims is beyond what we have time for this morning. But you can see that Calvinists and Arminians are making similar moves (logically speaking), they're just prioritizing different things. It's not hard to see how this can shape how a person looks at a passage like Romans 9. Previous decisions can influence the options people are open to considering in these verses.

But there is another approach to Romans 9 that is worth mentioning. Some people sidestep many of these challenges by arguing that Paul, in Romans 9, is not really dealing with God's choice of individuals, but God's selection of people groups for different roles in salvation history.¹⁹ Some within this camp go as far as to claim that these verses aren't really addressing salvation at all (though this seems to be a minority). The various presentations of views like this are sometimes referred to as the "corporate view," which was popularized by a theologian named Karl Barth.²⁰ Marvin Pate offers a helpful summary of the corporate view:

"It claims that Romans 9:6-29 teaches that God chooses entities, not individuals. Thus in the Old Testament God chose Isaac/Jews not Ishmael/Arabs, and Jacob/Israel not Esau/Edom, and Moses/Israel not Pharaoh/Egypt. And it was up to each individual to decide whether or not to align with God's corporate people. In the New Testament, God chose Christ to be the savior, and double predestination was fulfilled in him: God's wrath for the sinners was poured out on the cross, so that God's mercy could be poured out on those same sinners."²¹

Now, there's a part of me that really likes this view. I think many of the advocates of the position have rightly recognized that some of the passages that Paul draws on use individuals to represent entities. Paul surely would have known this. So I greatly appreciate the consistency that they are seeing between the original Old Testament contexts and what they believe Paul is calling to mind in Romans.²² So there is something to be said about this position.

However, I can't go along with it for a number of reasons and have time to only mention a few of those reasons without much defense. First of all, I don't think some of these folks have adequately understood how Paul cites the Old Testament (or the function of biblical typology). It's not that Paul contradicts the intention of the Old Testament writers, but rather that he often points to new layers of significance or fulfillment. We know he does that even in Romans 9. For example, his Hosea quotations in verses 25 and 26 were originally a reference to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, but he, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, shifts the application to the Gentiles. So I agree with Doug Moo, the chair of the translation committee that brought us the NIV, "we cannot assume that Paul will apply the texts he quotes in exactly the same sense that they have in their own context."²³ That context is important, but not necessarily definitive. This is a hot topic in New Testament studies. Lots of ink has been spilt on this subject.²⁴

In addition, one can detect a lot of language that is typical in Paul's writings when he is referring to the salvation of individuals.²⁵ That language includes being "the offspring" of Abraham (e.g., 9:7-8),²⁶ "Regarded as" (or "counted/reckoned as") (e.g., 9:8),²⁷ being "the children of the promise" (e.g., 9:8),²⁸ the verb "to call" with God as the subject (e.g., 9:12, 24; cf. 9:7),²⁹ the "not by" or "apart from works" language (e.g., 9:12),³⁰ and the contrast toward the end between "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" and "vessels of mercy, which [God] has prepared beforehand for glory" (9:22-23).³¹ This is salvation language for Paul and dozens of examples can be cited from his writings alone. I don't think he's deviating from his normal use of this language. I think he has in view (at least in part) matters pertaining to the salvation of individuals.

And, finally, I'm not sure if the corporate view really fits Paul's rhetorical flow.³² One example will suffice,³³ which Pate articulates well,

"I would like to side with the corporate view, but the objections raised by Paul's critic(s) (Rom. 9:6, 14, 19) are precisely what one would expect if God were choosing some individuals for eternal salvation and others for eternal damnation. One would not expect the corporate view of election to elicit those protests."³⁴

On the basis of these abbreviated arguments (and a few other considerations I don't have time for), I find myself siding with those who read Romans 9 and having implications for the salvation of individuals, which Paul seems to be laboring to show occurs unconditionally (i.e., apart from their works).³⁵ That's not an easy place to land in some respects. It raises questions and puts me in some uncomfortable corners. But I do think it is where the text takes us.

You may disagree. That's okay. My concern is not that you absolutely agree with me on all the particulars of these debate. It's more important to me that whatever side you land on you arrive there via an honest look at the biblical text and not simply through some emotional appeal or wishful thinking about what you think God should and should not do. This debate is not a test for membership or even orthodoxy. There's room for some disagreement. But let's at least acknowledge that the issues are difficult and people who may disagree with you aren't necessarily guilty of playing fast and loose with the text. A little humility would serve us well.

Now let's consider the particulars of the verses we read from Romans 9 for a moment. And by "moment," I do mean *brief* moment. In Paul's day there was a pressing question: How can Jesus be the Jewish Messiah when the majority of the Jewish people had rejected Him? In verse 6 to 13 (which we didn't read), Paul is dealing with that question, trying to show that the promises given to Israel concerning salvation have not failed. Why? Because he says, "*not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel*" (9:6). God's plans have always involved a remnant. A spiritual people. So while most of the physical descendants of Abraham

had, in Paul's day, rejected Jesus as Savior and Lord, there were at least some who had not. The promises had not failed. There is a spiritual remnant of faithful Israel.

This is where Paul gets into various choices God has made in history, involving men like Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, and Esau. That stretches from verses 6 to 12.³⁶ Given those choices, which Paul says are "*not because of works*" but simply "*because of him who calls*", one might wonder if this is really fair. That's where Paul goes next. Look at verse 14.

"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!" (Romans 9:14)

This is really strong language. Paul asks the question in Greek in a way that shows he is expecting a negative answer. And the negative answer he gives is emphatic! God is not unjust. Don't even entertain the thought. God is free to act as He chooses, but His actions are never tainted by sin or injustice. Verse 15...

"For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'³⁷ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." (Romans 9:15-16)

That quotation is from Exodus 33:19.³⁸ He then balances it out with a quotation from Exodus 9:16. Look at the next verse.

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" (Romans 9:17)

Verse 18 gives us a summary of the word to Moses and the word to Pharaoh:

"So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." (Romans 9:18)

That may seem like a strange way for Paul to answer that question. He doesn't really defend God's justice. But the way he answers helps us see that the question of verse 14 is misconceived. When we are dealing with humanity we are dealing with fallen and guilty sinners. We're not dealing with morally neutral people. If God chooses to harden us (as we deserve) in the prison of our own disobedient desires (11:32) or extend mercy to us (which we don't deserve) out of His free and gracious choice, He has done us no wrong. Sinners deserve judgment, not mercy. Mercy by its very nature is not owed. God is free to give it to anyone, everyone, or no one. Some receive mercy. Some receive justice. No one receives injustice. Why? Because "God is not obligated to be merciful to any or to all alike."³⁹

The truly startling thing, as John Stott pointed out, "is not that some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all." If anyone is lost, they have themselves to blame. If they are saved, the credit belongs to God alone.⁴⁰ As Charles Spurgeon has stated, "He that perishes chooses to perish; but he that is saved is saved because God has chosen to save him."⁴¹ Or as Charles Swindoll put it, "We lost our right to complain about poor treatment when we chose to rebel; therefore, anything we receive other than immediate death is mercy."⁴² Both Charles' are correct. It is God's sovereign right, therefore, to extend or withhold mercy, and His sovereign right "to harden some in the sinful shapes *they* have chosen".⁴³ He is completely just in either case.

Some want to push back at this point, "But that doesn't seem fair! Why not show everyone saving mercy? How can we resist His choice of mercy or hardening? How can anyone be blamed if they are not saved in the end?" Our fear, of course, is that "God will use his power arbitrarily and without regard to his subjects, or even against them."⁴⁴ But Paul sees these fears and objections coming.⁴⁵ Look at verse 19...

“You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?” (Romans 9:19-21)

This is a fascinating response. He offers no account of how to reconcile God’s sovereign will and human responsibility. Paul doesn’t go on defense at all. He goes on offense, merely asserting God’s freedom to do what He wants with His creatures. The metaphor is drawn from the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah.⁴⁶ It pictures God, as the potter, fashioning from the same lump of fallen humanity, vessels for honorable use and vessels for dishonorable use.⁴⁷ The potter decides what to make out of the clay.⁴⁸ The clay has no right to talk back to the potter.

It’s not the sincere question that Paul has in mind here, but the arrogant person who sets himself up as judge over the purposes of God. He talks back (“*answers back*”). To do so is arrogant and irreverent and, when put in the right perspective, comical that creations are questioning the Creator’s right to rule.⁴⁹ “The creator is not determined by the creation any more than a potter is determined by a pot.”⁵⁰ God doesn’t answer to us. I love Charles Swindoll’s remarks at this point,

“If the job of ‘Supreme Judge of the Universe’ ever opened, here at the qualifications necessary. The right applicant must be omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere at once), immutable (unchanging), eternal (above and beyond the bounds of time), self-existent (needing nothing), holy (the very definition of ‘good’), and just (absolutely right in all decisions). Not only is all humanity woefully unqualified for the position, we have no basis to second-guess the One who is.”⁵¹

But, I would add, rest assured, we can trust Him. He is a good God. There is no injustice in Him.

Please note, however (and note well), Paul is not saying that God’s sovereign choice removes human responsibility. The Bible never suggests that. Instead the Bible teaches two realities that we have to keep in balance. If you don’t hear anything else I say, try to remember these truths.

Truth One: God Has Unconditioned and Absolute Sovereignty

Truth Two: Humans Have Full Responsibility for Their Sinful Choices

I believe these two truths are compatible, which makes me a “compatibilist.” I believe these truths are compatible because I believe the Scriptures affirm them both. I know not how they are compatible, because the Scriptures don’t answer all my questions on that front. But I believe there is enough evidence in God’s Word to affirm that these two truths are not incompatible.⁵²

Never does the Bible suggest, as far as I can tell, that because God is sovereign, humans are not responsible for their choices and therefore not guilty for their sin.⁵³ Much of the plea of the Bible is for men and women to face up to their responsibility. God reveals Himself. They suppress the truth and prefer the lie. God gives them over to what they wanted. Romans 1. The entire assumption is that we are responsible beings who are held accountable. Paul is not denying human guilt. He spent the opening chapters of the epistle establishing it. No one escapes that guilt. We are all sinners. On the other hand, God actively accomplishes His will through the actions (good or bad) of human beings, but that does not negate the fact that those human beings are making moral choices, choices they are held accountable for.⁵⁴

The Bible holds the truths up together. There are tons of examples in the Bible (tons!) that show *in the same event* both God’s sovereign will and the flawed human will held accountable. It’s all over the place. Moderns pit these truths against once another, but the Bible never does. It just affirms both together.

So in Genesis, Joseph looks back and remembers how his brothers sold him into slavery and how God brought him to power in Egypt and he says to his trembling brothers, *“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”* The same event Joseph sees as ordained by God and yet intended for evil by his brothers. God is sovereign. His brothers are responsible for their sinful choice. Both are true at the same time.

Or in Exodus, the Pharaoh in his anger turns on the Hebrews and increases their labor, requiring them to make bricks without the provision of straw. But then Moses turns to God and says, *“Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people...”* (Exodus 5:22-23; NIV). So which is it? Did the Lord bring trouble or did Pharaoh? Both. God is sovereign over these affairs, but Pharaoh too has freely chosen them with sinister intentions. *“Pharaoh freely chooses what God ordains.”*⁵⁵

Or in Isaiah 10. The prophet speaks of the judgment God is bringing on His people through the armies of Assyria. He refers to Assyria as *“the rod of my anger”* and *“the club of my wrath”* (10:5). He’s using Assyria as the tool in His hand to bring judgment on Israel. But in the same breath, God says of Assyria, *“But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations”* (10:7). You see, Assyria is freely embarking on this conquest of Israel because they have evil imperialistic intentions. So they are freely choosing to pursue their sinful agenda, yet God is spoken of as sovereignly using them as the tool in His own hand. Both ideas are together.

But because they are freely choosing this course, God holds them accountable for their sinful arrogance. In the next breath we read, *“When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, ‘I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes’*” (10:12). And God says in His anger against Assyria (who was God’s tool), *“Does the ax raise itself above the person who swings it, or the saw boast against the one who uses it? As if a rod were to wield the person who lifts it up, or a club brandish the one who is not wood! Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors...”* (10:15-16). God wielded them as His tool against Israel and then judges them for the wickedness they perpetuated against Israel in the same act. God’s sovereignty does not negate their responsibility. *“Thus Assyria is responsible for its callous indifference to God and its cruelty even while God uses the Assyrians as a tool to chasten His own people.”*⁵⁶

Or here in Romans. The sovereignty of God on full display in chapter 9, a discourse on human responsibility in chapter 10, and the ultimate plan of God in it all in chapter 11.

Or take the cross of Christ and the events leading up to it. Judas betrays the Messiah. Herod showed contempt for Jesus (Luke 23:11). The Jews cried out for His execution (23:21). Pilate spinelessly handed him over (23:24). The Gentile soldier’s mocked him (23:36). All of these acts sinful and freely chosen. Each and all. And yet according to Acts 2:23, Jesus was *“delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”* to be *“crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”* And a couple chapters later, Luke helps us again to see the sovereignty of God (Acts 4:27 and 28). He writes, *“for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”* In the same actions, sinners are working their intentions while the sovereign God is working His own. The former is called to account. The latter is brought much glory. And here I agree with the assessment of D. A. Carson.

“A moment’s reflection discloses that any other account of what happened would destroy biblical Christianity. If we picture the crucifixion of Jesus Christ solely in terms of the conspiracy of the local political authorities at the time, and *not* in terms of God’s plan (save perhaps that he came in

at the last moment and decided to use the death in a way he himself had not foreseen), then the entailment is that the cross was an accident of history. Perhaps it was an accident cleverly manipulated by God in his own interests, but it was not part of the divine plan. In that case, the entire pattern of antecedent predictive revelation is destroyed: *Yom Kippur*, the Passover lamb, the sacrificial system, and so forth. Rip Hebrews out of your Bible, for a start.

On the other hand, if someone were to stress God's sovereignty in Jesus' death, exulting that all the participants 'did what [God's] power and will had decided beforehand should happen' (4:28), while forgetting that it was a wicked conspiracy, then Herod and Pilate and Judas Iscariot and the rest are exonerated of evil. If God's sovereignty means that all under it are immune from charges of transgression, then all are immune. In that case there is no sin for which atonement is necessary. So why the cross? Either way, the cross is destroyed.

In short, compatibilism is a *necessary* component to any mature and orthodox view of God and the world."⁵⁷

Yes, new questions are raised by all of this, I know. If this were a different setting, we could have philosophical conversations about how to ground human responsibility, or understand secondary causalities, or issues related to contingent beings, or the relationship between election, grace, and assurance, and so on... But you're not philosophy students and I'm already out of time. But even then we would be left with much mystery.⁵⁸ I have not sorted it all out, nor do I expect to ever have it all sorted out.

So I'll simply pivot to a final question. If "vessels of wrath" and "vessels of mercy" emerge from the Potter's hand, we might wonder why God doesn't just destroy the "vessels of wrath" right away?⁵⁹ We might cry out with the martyrs of Revelation, "*How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of earth and avenge our blood?*" (Revelation 6:10). Why must we see so much devastation and evil fill the world because He seems to patiently withhold His judgment? If they are prepared for destruction, then why let continue on in life and sin?

The reason for God's patience, no doubt, has something to do with God giving every opportunity for salvation to sinners.⁶⁰ Maybe even to you. But that's not the direction Paul takes in Romans 9. Look at verse 22 and following, where Paul proposes an answer (at least a partial one).

"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared⁶¹ for destruction, in order to⁶² make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?" (Romans 9:22-24)

Perhaps then God does intend to glorify Himself above all else. Perhaps, for whatever mysterious reason that only He fully know, His glory is best seen not simply in His mercy but also in His judgment. Perhaps God's judgment provides a backdrop that makes His mercy really shine all the brighter.⁶³

I don't pretend to understand all of this. But there is something mysterious about the way God's judgment and mercy relate. He explores this in chapter 11. The partial hardening of Israel leads to the mercy being extended to the Gentiles, to us. And we see it in the chapter 12 of Exodus, where I hope to pick up again soon. Because there in Exodus 12 we find God providing the Passover lamb for His people, that they might be spared the death of the tenth and final plague. The plague then comes upon Pharaoh's house and all of Egypt as God's climactic act of judgment. But His people are spared that judgment. And what is more, that act of judgment leads to the Exodus event, the people's freedom, God's mercy. We'll see all of that in chapter 12. The mingling of judgment and mercy.

But all of that history was also a picture of what was coming. A picture of what the disciples were meant to recall when they reflected on that final meal with Jesus, a Passover meal. God provided a Lamb, the Lamb

of God, sinless and spotless, to take our place in death. The blood of that Lamb covers God's people through faith and they too are spared the wrath and judgment of God. That is what Jesus has done for us on the Cross. He was slaughtered so that we could be spared. Rent so that we could be redeemed. Put to death so that we could live. That's what we must remember now as we turn our attention to the Lord's Table...

Pray with me...

¹ One may wonder why a preacher would venture into such topics since they can prove to be so divisive in our world. I would contend that, however, that the body of Christ needs the whole counsel of God and no topic of God's Word should be avoided. Charles Spurgeon believed that it would be a great offense against God to withhold such truth. He preached in a sermon, "Some of you have never preached on election since you were ordained. 'These things,' you say, 'are offensive.' And so you would rather offend God than offend man. But you reply, 'These things will not be practical.' I do think that the climax of all man's blasphemy is centered in that utterance. Tell me that God put a thing in the Bible that I am not to preach! You are finding fault with my God. But you say, 'It will be dangerous.' What! God's truth dangerous? I should not like to stand in your shoes when you have to face your Maker on the day of judgment after such an utterance as that."

² "Declaration of Arminius" in *The Christian Observer* (1807), 179.

³ This is sometimes referred to as the "prescient" view of predestination.

⁴ *The Reformation Study Bible* (ESV; Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2015), 1650. The author goes on to tie this idea to the text in question (Romans 9): "As in the case of Jacob and Esau, the elect are chosen solely on the basis of the sovereign good pleasure of God and not on the basis of anything they have done or will do. Paul declares: 'And not only so but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' ... So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy' (Rom. 9:10-12, 16)." Ibid.

⁵ *Predestination of the Saints* 17.34.

⁶ Douglas Moo writes, "One can understand why Calvinists think that verses 6-13 support their understanding of election. Paul explicitly says he is talking about 'election' (v. 11), and he uses related language of 'calling' twice (vv. 7, 12). Throughout the passage, he make clear that God's calling had nothing to do with one's natural descent (v. 8) or one's works (vv. 11-12). The initiative is clearly with God as the '[one] who calls' (v. 12), not with what the person does." Douglas J. Moo, *Romans* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 306.

⁷ In the words of Princess Leia of Star Wars fame. And, no, I do not believe she was expressing her frustrations against her theological opponent. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSwyNN7ms00>

⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000).

⁹ "John's Gospel is especially rich in this theme. Twice we are told that the Father loves the Son, once with the verb ἀγαπάω (John 3:35), and once with φιλέω (John 5:20). Yet the evangelist also insists that the world must learn that Jesus loves the Father (John 14:31). This intra-Trinitarian love of God not only marks off Christian monotheism from all other monotheisms, but is bound up in surprising ways with revelation and redemption." Carson, 16. He deals with this more in depth in his second chapter.

¹⁰ "By and large the Bible veers away from using the word *love* in this connection, but the theme is not hard to find. God creates everything, and before there is a whiff of sin, he pronounces all that he has made to be "good" (Gen. 1). This is the product of a *loving* Creator. The Lord Jesus depicts a world in which God clothes the grass of the fields with the glory of wildflowers seen by no human being, perhaps, but seen by God. The lion roars and hauls down its prey, but it is God who feeds the animal. The birds of the air find food, but that is the result of God's loving providence, and not a sparrow falls from the sky apart from the sanction of the Almighty (Matt. 6). If this were not a benevolent providence, a *loving* providence, then the moral lesson that Jesus drives home, viz. that this God can be trusted to provide for his own people, would be incoherent." Ibid., 16-17.

¹¹ “God so loved *the world* that he gave his Son (John 3:16). I know that some try to take κόσμος (‘world’) here to refer to the elect. But that really will not do. All the evidence of the usage of the word in John’s Gospel is against the suggestion. True, *world* in John does not so much refer to bigness as to badness. In John’s vocabulary, *world* is primarily the moral order in willful and culpable rebellion against God. In John 3:16 God’s love in sending the Lord Jesus is to be admired not because it is extended to so big a thing as the world, but to so bad a thing; not to so many people, as to such wicked people. Nevertheless elsewhere John can speak of ‘the *whole* world’ (1 John 2:2), thus bringing bigness and badness together. More importantly, in Johannine theology the disciples themselves once belonged to the world but were drawn out of it (e.g., John 15:19). On this axis, God’s love for the world cannot be collapsed into his love for the elect. The same lesson is learned from many passages and themes in Scripture. However much God stands in judgment over the world, he also presents himself as the God who invites and commands all human beings to repent. He orders his people to carry the Gospel to the farthest corner of the world, proclaiming it to men and women everywhere. To rebels the sovereign Lord calls out, ‘As surely as I live ... I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’ (Ezek. 33:11).” Carson, 17-18.

¹² “The elect may be the entire nation of Israel or the church as a body or individuals. In each case, God sets his affection on his chosen ones in a way in which he does not set his affection on others. The people of Israel are told, ‘The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt’ (Deut. 7:7-8; cf. 4:37). Again: ‘To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today’ (10:14-15). The striking thing about these passages is that when Israel is contrasted with the universe or with other nations, the distinguishing feature has nothing of personal or national merit; it is nothing other than the love of God. In the very nature of the case, then, God’s love is directed toward Israel in these passages in a way in which it is *not* directed toward other nations. Obviously, this way of speaking of the love of God is unlike the other three ways of speaking of God’s love that we have looked at so far. This discriminating feature of God’s love surfaces frequently. ‘I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated’ (Mal. 1:2-3), God declares. Allow all the room you like for the Semitic nature of this contrast, observing that the absolute form can be a way of articulating absolute preference; yet the fact is that God’s love in such passages is peculiarly directed toward the elect. Similarly in the New Testament: Christ ‘loved the church’ (Eph. 5:25). Repeatedly the New Testament texts tell us that the love of God or the love of Christ is directed toward those who constitute the church.” Ibid., 18-19. He goes into greater detail on this subject in his fourth chapter.

¹³ “It is part of the relational structure of knowing God; it does not have to do with how we become true followers of the living God, but with our relationship with him once we do know him. ‘Keep yourselves in God’s love,’ Jude exhorts his readers (v. 21), leaving the unmistakable impression that someone might *not* keep himself or herself in the love of God. Clearly this is not God’s providential love; it is pretty difficult to escape that. Nor is this God’s yearning love, reflecting his salvific stance toward our fallen race. Nor is it his eternal, elective love. If words mean anything, one does not, as we shall see, walk away from that love either. Jude is not the only one who speaks in such terms. The Lord Jesus commands his disciples to remain in his love (John 15:9), and adds, ‘If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love’ (John 15:10). To draw a feeble analogy: Although there is a sense in which my love for my children is immutable, so help me God, regardless of what they do, there is another sense in which they know well enough that they must remain in my love. If for no good reason my teenagers do not get home by the time I have prescribed, the least they will experience is a bawling out, and they may come under some restrictive sanctions. There is no use reminding them that I am doing this because I love them. That is true, but the manifestation of my love for them when I ground them and when I take them out for a meal or attend one of their concerts or take my son fishing or my daughter on an excursion of some sort is rather different in the two cases. Only the latter will feel much more like remaining in my love than falling under my wrath. Nor is this a phenomenon of the new covenant alone. The Decalogue declares God to be the one who shows his love ‘to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments’ (Exod. 20:6). Yes, ‘[t]he LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love’ (Ps. 103:8). In this context, his love is *set over against* his wrath. Unlike some other texts we shall examine, his people live under his love *or* under his wrath, in function of their covenantal faithfulness: ‘He will not *always* accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love *for those who fear him*.... As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion *on those who fear him*.... But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is *with those who fear him* ... *with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts*’ (Ps. 103:9-11, 13, 17-18). This is the language of relationship between God and the covenant community.” Ibid., 19-21.

¹⁴ An excellent exploration of this question (and several related ones) and a good survey of the biblical texts in tension, can be found in John Piper’s *Does God Desire All to Be Saved?* The stated purpose of his books is as follows: “My aim in this short book is to show from Scripture that the simultaneous existence of God’s will for all people to be saved and his will to choose some people for salvation unconditionally before creation is not a sign of divine schizophrenia or exegetical confusion. A corresponding aim is to show that unconditional election therefore does not contradict biblical expressions of God’s compassion for all people and does not rule out sincere offers of salvation to all who are lost among the peoples of the world.” John Piper, *Does God Desire All to Be Saved in The Collected Works of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 8.631.

¹⁵ The only alternative conclusion would be, as John Piper explains, “that there is a power in the universe greater than God’s, which is frustrating him by overruling what he desires. Neither the Reformed nor the Arminians affirm this.” *Ibid.*, 8.654.

¹⁶ See John Piper’s work, *Does God Desire All to Be Saved?*

¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall, for example, makes the following remarks concerning 1 Timothy 2:4: “To avoid all misconceptions it should be made clear at the outset that the fact that God wishes or wills that all people should be saved does not necessarily imply that all will respond to the gospel and be saved. We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen, and both of these things can be spoken of as God’s will. The question at issue is not whether all will be saved but whether God has made provisions in Christ for the salvation of all, provided they believe, and without limiting the potential scope of the death of Christ merely to those whom God knows will believe.” I. Howard Marshall, “Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles,” in *A Case for Arminianism: The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 56.

¹⁸ Piper, *Collected Works*, 8.654, 655.

¹⁹ Charles Spurgeon reacted strongly against those who try to soften the doctrine of election by suggesting that it pertains simply to God’s choice of nations and not individuals. He remarks, “It is the most miserable shift on earth to make out that God hath not chosen persons but nations... If it were not just to choose a person, it would be far more unjust to choose a nation, since nations are but the union of multitudes of persons, and to choose a nation seems to be a more gigantic crime—if election be a crime—than to choose one person. Surely, to choose ten thousand would be considered to be worse than choosing one; to distinguish a whole nation from the rest of mankind, does seem to be a greater extravaganza in the acts of divine sovereignty than the election of one poor mortal, and leaving out another.”

²⁰ See his *Church Dogmatics*, II.2.

²¹ C. Marvin Pate, *Romans* (Teach the Text Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 194.

²² I believe Moo represents this position fairly: “What seems clear is that none of these texts says anything directly about the spiritual fate of the individuals Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, and Esau. The Old Testament does not—at least in these texts—reflect on whether they were saved or not; it is concerned solely with the roles they would play in salvation history. God’s election of them is not election to salvation, but election to play a certain role in the unfolding plan of God. If Paul is using these texts in accordance with their original intent, he, too, must be reflecting on the way God has chosen certain people, or nations, to play positive and negative roles in salvation history. Isaac, Jacob, and Israel contributed to God’s plan by carrying on his promise. Ishmael, Esau, and Edom contribute also to that plan by opposing God and his people and giving God the opportunity to display his glory. As most Bible students know, this conclusion has important ramifications for the theology of Romans 9. For this passage has been a basic source of support for the Calvinist view of election. But if Paul applies Old Testament texts according to their original intent, the Calvinists’ appeal to Romans 9 is undercut and perhaps excluded altogether. Calvinist interpreters have then made the mistake of reading election to salvation into a text that is not about it at all.” Moo, NIVAC, 303. Cf. Klein, *The New Chosen People*; H. L. Ellison, *The Mystery of Israel: An Exposition of Romans 9-11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966).

²³ Moo, NIVAC, 304. He continues, “This, of course, does not mean that Paul does not often do so. Interpreters who deny that Paul can be speaking about individual salvation in 9:6-13 because of the Old Testament texts he cites may have a legitimate argument. But that is not a decisive argument. We cannot be sure that Paul applies these texts to the historical origins of the line of promise. Paul may be treating Isaac and Jacob on the one hand and Ishmael and Esau on the other ahistorically, as types of salvation and damnation. Or he may be citing the history of the promise in order to isolate a principle of God’s sovereign calling that he applies to the salvation of individuals in his own day. Only a careful appraisal of verses 6-13 in their context can decide this issue.” *Ibid.*

²⁴ See, for instance, Douglas Moo, “The Problem of Sensus Plenior,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

²⁵ See Moo, NIVAC, 306-307.

²⁶ E.g., 4:13, 16, 18; Galatians 3:16, 19, 29. Moo points out that the only exception is 2 Corinthians 11:22.

²⁷ E.g., 2:26; 4:3, 5, 9, 22. Cf. Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 23, 24; Galatians 3:6.

²⁸ E.g., Galatians 4:28.

²⁹ E.g., 8:30; 9:24-26; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 7:15, 17-18, 20-22, 24; Galatians 1:6, 15; 5:8, 13; Ephesians 4:1, 4; Colossians 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 4:7; 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 1:9.

³⁰ E.g., 4:6; 9:32; 11:6; Ephesians 2:9.

³¹ “The contrast between wrath and glory shows that Paul is writing about individuals destined for judgment on the one hand and individuals destined for glory on the other. Salvation is the issue. What becomes explicit in this last contrast is implicit in the others as well.” *Ibid.*, 313. Similarly, Stott writes, “‘Glory’ is of course shorthand for the final destiny of the redeemed, in which the splendor of God will be shown to and in them, as first they are transformed and then the universe (cf. 8:18f.)” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 273.

³² For example, referring to Romans 9:6-13, Moo writes, “the conclusion that Paul is thinking of Jacob and Esau here as individuals is hard to resist. He has specifically rehearsed their personal histories in verses 11-12, referring to their birth and their ‘works.’ It is difficult to think that Paul switches from this personal reference to a corporate one, without warning, in verse 13.” Moo, NIVAC, 302.

³³ Others could be offered (see previous footnote), including the contextual observation of Moo: “A reference to the way God saves individuals suits the context best, Paul is trying to show why there exists a spiritual Israel *within* physical Israel (v. 6b). Reference to God’s election of Israel as a nation does not serve this argument, nor does an analysis of the way God used people in salvation history. What he seeks to show is that God’s promise to Israel never guaranteed salvation for all Jews. Verses 6-13 advance this argument online if Paul is applying what he says there to the status of individual Jews. We agree, then, with the basic thesis of John Piper in his careful analysis of this passage: Paul uses the Old Testament story of God’s sovereign selection of Isaac and Jacob to establish a basic principle about the way God selects people. The language Paul uses and the context of the verses make it clear that he applies this principle to God’s election of individuals to salvation.” *Ibid.*, 307; cf. Piper, *The Justification of God*, 45-54.

³⁴ Pate, 194.

³⁵ See also Thomas Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 89-106; Robert W. Yarborough, “Divine Election in the Gospel of John,” in *ibid.*, 47-62; Donald J. Westblade, “Divine Election in the Pauline Literature,” in *ibid.*, 63-88; Samuel Storms, *Chosen for Life: The Perfect Plan for His Glory and His Children* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God: Knowing God’s Perfect Plan for His Glory and His Children* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2010).

³⁶ “Some thing ‘hate’ may mean simply, in Semitic fashion, ‘love less.’ But the Old Testament context points in a different direction. That context is clearly covenantal, so that ‘love’ means, in effect, ‘choose,’ while ‘hate’ means ‘reject.’” Moo, NIVAC, 301. See also R. L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1984), 305.

³⁷ Commenting on 9:15, Spurgeon wrote the following: “In these words the Lord in the plainest manner claims the right to give or to withhold his mercy according to his own sovereign will. As the prerogative of life and death is vested in the monarch, so the Judge of all the earth has a right to spare or condemn the guilty, as may seem best in his sight. Men by their sins have forfeited all claim upon God; they deserve to perish for their sins--and if they all do so, they have no ground for complaint. If the Lord steps in to save any, he may do so if the ends of justice are not thwarted; but if he judges it best to leave the condemned to suffer the righteous sentence, none may arraign him at their bar. Foolish and impudent are all those discourses about the rights of men to be all placed on the same footing; ignorant, if not worse, are those contentions against discriminating grace, which are but the rebellions of proud human nature against the crown and sceptre of Jehovah. When we are brought to see our own utter ruin and ill desert, and the justice of the divine verdict against sin, we no longer cavil at the truth that the Lord is not bound to save us; we do not murmur if he chooses to save others, as though he were doing us an injury, but feel that if he deigns to look upon us, it will be his own free act of undeserved goodness, for which we shall forever bless his name. How shall those who are the subjects of divine election sufficiently adore the grace of God? They have no room for boasting, for sovereignty most effectually excludes it. The Lord's will alone is glorified, and the very notion of human merit is cast out to everlasting contempt. There is no more humbling doctrine in Scripture than that of election, none more promotive of gratitude, and, consequently, none more sanctifying. Believers should not be afraid of it, but adoringly rejoice in it.” John Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening* (Downers Grove: Discovery House, 2016), 667.

³⁸ James R. Edwards points out, “A Targum to this verse reads, ‘I will spare whomever is worthy of being spared, and I will have mercy on whomever is worthy of being pitied.’ The idea of worthiness is exactly what Paul does *not* want to suggest. God chose Abraham before the Torah had been revealed; God chose Jacob over Esau before either had merited or forfeited the blessing; God revealed his Son to Paul while he was still a persecutor of the church; God justifies persons by grace through faith while they are still sinners (5:8) and apart from works of the law.” James Edwards, *Romans* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 237. I would also add, that verses like this are one of the reasons that many people reject the notion that God is electing some based on a foreknowledge that looks ahead and sees that they will one day choose to have faith in Him. Putting aside for a moment if that that understanding is really consistent with the way the words for foreknowledge are used in Scripture (which is very much disputed), Paul is laboring to show that God’s mercy is extended apart from a person’s willing (desires, choices, attitudes) or running (works). Would this not include their future willing or running? His mercy is owing to His own will, Paul argues.

³⁹ *The Reformation Study Bible*, “Predestination,” 1650.

⁴⁰ Stott, 269-270. Similarly, Charles Swindoll writes, “The bottom line: God alone deserves credit for salvation; the condemned person is solely culpable for his or her punishment... Rather than complaining that some will not be saved, we should see the glass more than half full and thank God that *anyone* will be saved!” Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights of Romans* (SNTI; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 196, 197.

⁴¹ Drawn from the following website, accessed at the time this sermon was preached:
<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/charles-spurgeon-calvinism-unconditional-election/>

⁴² Swindoll, 196.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁴ Edwards, 238.

⁴⁵ Stott frames the objections accurately: “If salvation is due entirely to God’s will (which it is, as stated twice in verse 15 and twice more in verse 18), and if we do not resist his will (which we do not, and indeed could not), *one of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’* (19). In other words, is it fair for God to hold us accountable to him, when he makes the decisions?” Stott, 270. Or, as F. F. Bruce captured it, “if God foreordains people’s ways by his own

will, why does he blame them for their ways? They do not oppose his will; they act in accordance with it.” F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 178.

⁴⁶ Jeremiah 18:1-10; Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; cf. Wisdom of Solomon 15:7. Once again, Moo’s insights are helpful: “Interpreters evaluate the significance of these parallels in different ways. Some stress that at least two of the passages (Isa. 45:9 and Jer. 18:6–10) use the imagery to describe God’s right to use and to reshape *nations* as he chooses, which would provide yet more evidence that Paul is writing throughout this passage about God’s use of nations in salvation history rather than the salvation of individuals. But other texts (esp. Isa. 29:16) denounce the *hybris* of individual people who dare to question the ways of God. Paul may have been familiar with this passage from his knowledge (in oral form, of course) of the teaching of Jesus. For the Lord used a verse from this same context (29:13) to scold the scribes and the Pharisees (see Matt. 15:8–9; Mark 7:6–7). The fact is that the imagery of God as potter was so common that it is impossible to be sure which text or texts Paul may have had in mind (see also, e.g., Job 10:9; 38:14; Isa. 64:8; Sir. 33:13; *T. Naph.* 2.2, 4; 1QS 11:22). We must again, then, avoid reading into Romans ideas drawn from specific Old Testament or Jewish texts.” Moo, NIVAC, 315.

⁴⁷ Some of this language is used in 2 Timothy 2:20, where it is talking about different purposes God assigns to different people within the house of God. On this basis, some have tried to argue that the language is not intended to refer to individuals who are saved and those condemned, but merely the different roles people have played in salvation history. However, we should not that 2 Timothy does refer to vessels made from different materials and not the same lump of clay. And further more, the vessels in Romans 9 and put parallel to the “vessels of mercy, which he has prepared for glory” and the “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (9:22, 23), which is hard to imagine are not referring to salvation and “God’s freedom to choose some people to be saved and leave others in their spiritual deadness.” *Ibid.*, 312. See also John Piper, *The Justification of God*, 174-183; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:32-33.

⁴⁸ Moo notes, “As is the case with any analogy, the parallel is by no means perfect. Human beings, created in God’s image, have the power to think and make decisions; they are far more than inert clay. But the analogy works well at the one vital point the apostle wants to make here: God’s right to fashion from the clay the kinds of vessels he wants.” Moo, NIVAC, 311-312.

⁴⁹ Perhaps “we need, like Job, to put our hand over our mouth, confess that we tend to speak things we do not understand, despise ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.” Stott, 271. Cf. Job 40:4; 42:3, 6.

⁵⁰ Edwards, 236.

⁵¹ Swindoll, 195.

⁵² Carson, *Difficult Doctrine*, 52.

⁵³ “The hardening of God does not make fault impossible, it makes fault certain.” John Piper, “The Hardening of Pharaoh and the Hope of the World,” preached to Bethlehem Baptist Church on February 9, 2003, accessed online as of the date of the sermon you are reading at the following address: <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-hardening-of-pharaoh-and-the-hope-of-the-world>

⁵⁴ D. A. Carson, “Chosen By God (Romans 8:28-30; 9:1-29) – Part 2,” which was accessed online in June 2017 at the following address: <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/chosen-by-god-romans-8-28-30-9-1-29-part-2>. He goes on to say, “The fact of the matter is that Paul does not make the assumption of many moderns. Many moderns make the assumption that human responsibility depends on absolute freedom of the human will. In other words, many moderns assume that for human beings to be morally accountable, held responsible, they must have absolute freedom? The problem of course is that with absolute freedom, I mean really absolute, sooner or later, you make God absolutely contingent, that is, you make him depend upon us. And the fact of the matter is that there are scores and scores of texts in Scripture that picture in one event both our flawed will held accountable and God’s sovereign will.”

⁵⁵ Edwards, 238.

⁵⁶ Carson, “Chosen By God.”

⁵⁷ Carson, *Difficult Doctrine*, 53-54.

⁵⁸ There are many difficult passages to consider yet. For example, 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12—“*Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness*” (cf. 1 Kings 22, Ezekiel 14:9). And then there are passages like John 12:36-43, which connect the unbelief of Jesus’ day to the hardening of God. Important considerations must be kept in mind when dealing with such texts. See “You asked: Does God Harden a Believer’s Heart?” by Tony Reinke, which could be accessed as of June 2017 at the following website: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/you-asked-does-god-harden-a-believers-heart>

⁵⁹ F. F. Bruce puts the question like this—“Suppose that God wishes to display his righteous judgment and his power, says Paul, why should he not bear patiently with people like Pharaoh—pots (to carry on the metaphor) fashioned to be object-lessons of his wrath, fit only to be destroyed? And why should he not display the greatness of his glory by means of other ‘pots’ which are to be the object-lessons of his mercy, prepared in advance for this glorious purpose? Paul, more cautious than some of his systematizers, does not say outright that God does this, but asks, ‘What if he does so? Who will bring him to book?’” Bruce, 179.

⁶⁰ This is Swindoll’s answer. He writes, “the Lord allows the progress of time within creation to separate the elect from the nonelect. God knows who has been elected to receive mercy and who has not, but we don’t. He sees and judges the inner hearts of men and women, while we see and judge only the exterior. Someone who appears evil to us may in fact be a ‘vessel of mercy’ yet to be transformed” (Swindoll, 199; so also Edwards, 241). On a related note, Spurgeon responds to the charge that

adopting his view of election would reduce the scope of a preacher's evangelistic appeal with potent and pointed levity: "They can all be saved. If God had put a yellow streak up and down the backs of the elect, I'd go up and down the streets lifting up shirrtails to find out who had the yellow streak up and down his back. Then I'd give that person the gospel. But God didn't do that. He told me to preach the gospel to every creature and that whosoever will may come."

⁶¹ Vessels "prepared for wrath" and "prepared for glory" has often sparked the conversation about "double predestination." In *The Reformation Study Bible* (1997) there is a helpful argument that conveys what *many* in the Reformed tradition mean by the expression: "Predestination is double. The only way to avoid the doctrine of double predestination is to either affirm that God predestinates everybody to election or that He predestinates no one to either election or reprobation. Since the Bible clearly teaches predestination to election and denies universal salvation, we must conclude that predestination is double. It includes both election and reprobation." Some consider "double predestination" to be an inescapable doctrine once one decides that God is choosing to elect only some for salvation (apart from their works or some future choice they make to place their faith in Christ that God foreknows), as clearly the writers of that article do. That said, how one understands the means of this double predestination is important. They writers continue, "Some have viewed double predestination as a matter of equal causation, where God is equally responsible for cause the reprobate not to believe as He is for causing the elect to believe. We call this a *positive-positive* view of predestination." However, they continue, "The Reformed view of double predestination follows a *positive-negative* schema. In the case of the elect, God intervenes to positively and actively work grace in their souls and bring them to saving faith. He unilaterally regenerates the elect and insures their salvation. In the case of the reprobate He does not work evil in them or prevent them from coming to faith. Rather, He passes over them, leaving them to their own sinful devices. In this view there is no symmetry of divine action. God's activity in asymmetrical between the elect and the reprobate. There is, however, a kind of equal ultimacy. The reprobate, who are passed over by God, are ultimately doomed, and their damnation is as certain and sure as the ultimate salvation of the elect." They point to how Luther interpreted the hardening of Pharaoh as an example. "Luther argued for a passive rather than an active hardening. That is, God did not create fresh evil in Pharaoh's heart to incline him to resist the will of God at every turn. All God ever has to do to harden anybody is to remove His restraining grace from them and given them over to their own evil impulses. This is precisely what God does to the damned in hell. He abandons them to their own wickedness" (Ibid). As it relates to this passage in Romans, many scholars have noted that the "prepared" language in this verse is not identical in the Greek. "[A]lthough Paul describes the objects of God's wrath simply as those *whom he prepared in advance for glory* (23), he describes the objects of God's wrath simply as *prepared for destruction*, ready and ripe for it, without indicating the agency responsible for this preparation" (Stott, 272). In Greek the vessels prepared for glory are clearly prepared by God. However, the "prepared" word connected to the vessels of wrath is a participle that could be taken as either middle or passive voice. If it's read as a middle, then these people should be thought of as having prepared themselves for destruction. If passive, then it could be taken to mean that God prepared them but alternatively one could taken to mean that they were prepared by their own sin. In the end it is ambiguous, but one can see how several viable options are available for interpretation. Why might this subtle voice difference have exegetical and theological significance we might wonder? Because it allows for one to argue that the Paul sees God's election to salvation as somehow different than the preparation of others for destruction. It allows people like Stott to not be pigeonholed into the "double predestination" box, at least as way that doctrine is often defined and explained. "Certainly God has never 'prepared' anybody for destruction; is it not by their own evildoing they prepared themselves for it?...he prepares some people in advance for glory and allows others to prepare themselves for destruction" (Stott, 272-273). And it allows people like Moo, who don't deny double predestination, to nonetheless maintain a version of it "different from what many Calvinists hold." Here's how Moo expresses his own position, which turns out to be more of the positive-negative variety: "Paul teaches that all people are involved in Adam's sin and are therefore under a sentence of death because of their sin (Rom. 5:12-21). God's decision to destine some people to wrath comes, we believe, *after* (in a logical sense) that sin. God's 'hardening,' then, does not cause spiritual insensitivity; it maintains people in the state of sin that they have already chosen. When God chooses people to be saved, he acts out of pure grace, granting a blessing to people who in no way deserve it. But when he destines people to wrath, he sentences them to the fate they have already chosen for themselves. It is perhaps for just this reason that we find the shift in construction in 9:22-23 and that Paul never uses the words 'call' or 'election' to refer to God's decision to leave people in their sins and the wrath they deserve. For this same reason, I prefer not to use the expression *double predestination*, as if both God's acts of predestination are of the same kind" (Moo, NIVAC, 317).

⁶² The purpose clause is significant. "God has tolerated sinners not only so he can display his wrath and power all the more clearly; he has done so especially in order to 'make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory' (23)" (Ibid., 312).

⁶³ Similarly, Carson commented in a sermon, "Do you see? There is a sense in which the glory of the cross, the glory of the forgiveness that we received, the glory of the grace of God, is enhanced because God actually dares also to display his wrath so that we may see how ugly, how hopeless, how disgusting sin is. Paul dares to take the argument that far" (Carson, "Chosen By God"). Stott writes, "The preeminent disclosure will be of the riches of God's glory; and the glory of his grace will shine the more brightly against the somber background of his wrath" (Stott, 273).