

# Predestination & Free Will

Dr. Steve Schell | Romans 9 | Week 10 Essential Doctrines

## **Excerpt from *Preaching Through Romans*, “Sovereign or Savior” (Romans 9:6-13)**

Does God love all humans and want to save them, or does He love certain ones and hate others? This portion of chapter 9 which we are reading today is a central passage to which people will turn to “prove” that God chooses who will or will not be saved. According to that doctrine the most important truth to emphasize about God is His sovereignty, meaning His control of everything. It is assumed that if humans have any choice in the matter of their eternal destiny, then God isn’t totally sovereign. So repentance is renounced as a basis for salvation because it involves the human will making a choice. Even faith in Christ is discounted. This doctrine says faith is something God gives to a person only after He regenerates them, meaning after He places His Holy Spirit inside them. Those who teach this say it is wrong to think a person can choose to believe the gospel. We don’t choose God; He chooses us, they say. This makes grace all the sweeter, they say. And on what basis, you might ask, does God choose one person but not another? The answer, they say, is found in this passage of Romans. After all, God loved Jacob but hated Esau before the twins were born or had “done anything good or bad” (v11). So there you have it, they say, the decision of who will or will not be saved is determined by God before we are born. And if you take this passage out of its context, you can indeed make it say that. But the God you end up with is very different from the loving Father Jesus reveals to us. And the conclusion you draw is very different from Paul’s own conclusion at the end of the chapter (vs30-33). Though all of this may sound like a pointless theological debate, what’s at stake is nothing less than the character of God. These two views of Him are so different they really present two different Gods.

### **What does Paul say? (Ro 9:6-13)**

The question Paul is dealing with is, “What’s gone wrong; why have so few Jews responded to the gospel?” He asks, “Does the fault lie with the gospel we are preaching? Is it untrue? Has God failed to anoint it?” By the term “word of God” he means the apostolic proclamation that he and the other apostles were preaching (Ac 17:1-5).

He immediately answers his own question. He says “no,” there’s nothing wrong with the gospel, but the gospel has exposed a problem: not all the physical descendants of Abraham are his spiritual descendants (true Jews).

This distinction between those who have only Abraham’s DNA and those who share his faith goes back to his own sons. One had his father’s faith (Isaac), and one didn’t (Ishmael).

That the issue was faith not works (birth order, personal holiness) is proven further by Jacob and Esau. God foreknew Jacob’s faith and loved him before he was born. The younger inherited the spiritual blessing because he had faith while his older brother did not.

### **Jacob and Esau**

Let’s look briefly at the lives of these two men:

- Genesis 25:19-34

- Malachi 1:1-5 Malachi is prophesying against Edom, the nation descended from Esau. God is saying His covenant is with Israel (His lovingkindness) not Edom.
- How did God treat the man Esau (Ge 33:1-11)? He prospered him.
- By “hate” Malachi means rejected from the covenant promises.

### **God’s purpose (Ro 9:11)**

There are two alternatives: either God chose Jacob based on nothing, or He chose him because He foreknew Jacob would have faith, and Esau wouldn’t. Paul says God’s choice was made based on His “purpose,” meaning His overall plan for salvation. He shows us the key elements of this plan in Romans 8:28-30. Let’s review it:

- Foreknew: God knew each person who would come to Him before He made the world.
- Predestined: He also decided what kind of people we would become. He determined that we would be conformed to Jesus so that in the age to come, He would be the head of an eternal family of resurrected humans. He purposed to accomplish this goal by three major actions:
- Called: He would offer salvation by sending the gospel on the lips of His people (Ro 10:13-15).
- Justified: He would send His Son to atone for all sin so those who would repent and believe would be free from judgment and qualify for His blessings.
- Glorified: Believers would be filled with the Holy Spirit and finally resurrected in glorious bodies.

### **Not because of works (Ro 9:11)**

Paul says God’s choice had nothing to do with what the twins would do whether “good or bad,” that His decision was not based on “works.” There are again two alternatives as to what this means:

- God chooses whom He will save based on nothing they do or don’t do.
- God chooses based only on faith. He doesn’t give salvation as a reward to those who’ve done enough good works to deserve it.

You might think the answer is obvious, that of course, God’s “choice” is based on faith not works, but those who favor the sovereignty of God argue that repentance and faith are good works. They say if a person freely exercises their will to repent and believe, then they have performed a good work, and since salvation is by grace and not works (Eph 2:8-9), then not even repentance and faith can affect who will be saved. They say God places these qualities into a person’s heart only after He saves them. For grace to be grace He must make His decision based on nothing including repentance or faith.

### **God’s sovereignty**

Can God be loving and sovereign at the same time? Yes of course, He’s both. But the question we face today is has He limited that sovereignty at least to the point that we humans have the power to make free, moral choices? The God-is-Sovereign doctrine says “no.” But the God-is-Savior doctrine says “yes;” He has sovereignly limited His sovereignty so that we humans determine our own eternal destiny, whether heaven or hell, not by earning heaven through good works but by responding to His “call” in the gospel. Aided by the Holy Spirit each of us can choose whether or not to repent and trust Christ.

### **Paul’s conclusion (Ro 9:30-10:3)**

The whole of chapter 9 is talking about one subject: Why did so many Jews reject the gospel while so many Gentiles received salvation? And Paul’s answer here has nothing to do with a sovereign choice made before people are born. He says it’s because the Gentiles repented and believed when they

heard the gospel, yet most Jews refused because they were determined to earn salvation by zealously observing the rules of the Law of Moses.

Please notice Paul does not say God sovereignly chose Gentiles instead of Jews. He says one group chose God's righteousness by faith, and the other didn't. In fact, in a very few verses he will go on to describe God as "abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Ro 10:12- 13). And later on he says that if these Jews who had been rejecting the gospel changed their minds, God would gladly restore them (Ro 11:23). The entire impact of his language is to say God wants to save and will if we will only call on Him.

### **Which God?**

Paul's open invitation to come and be saved sounds just like Jesus who said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). So which God is He? Is He a sovereign Lord who chooses a few or a loving Savior who invites all? Do we end up in hell because we have refused His grace or because He didn't want us to be in heaven with Him?

### **Application**

We might be tempted to think of this as an ancient debate that really doesn't affect us today, but that isn't true. This sovereign view of God is deeply entrenched in the American culture, and many assume the God of the Bible is harsh, arbitrary and responsible for everything that happens on the planet. They especially blame Him for disease, injuries and natural catastrophes. But there is another reason we need to understand this matter, and that is because this doctrine of God's complete sovereignty is being taught by some of the largest churches in the U.S. and is influencing the younger generation. Here's the danger: Where this is taught the emphasis on sovereignty tends to grow stronger and stronger, and the emphasis on God's love grows weaker and weaker until the spiritual atmosphere becomes so oppressive people walk away in disgust from what they assume to be Christianity and turn to what appear as kinder alternatives like atheism or universalism (everybody will be saved). These two camps really present two different Gods, and each will mold His followers into His image.

### **Application: I believe the truth is**

- You and I will never meet a person God doesn't love and want in heaven with Him.
- You and I will never meet a person for whom Jesus didn't die.
- No human on earth has lived a life good enough to deserve to go to heaven (except Jesus).
- The gospel has the power to save anyone willing to repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ.
- No matter how sinful we are, the Holy Spirit will empower us to do this.
- God is not threatened by our freedom to choose. He gave us this freedom. We are responsible for our eternal destiny. Those who go to heaven have chosen to repent and believe. Those who refuse enter eternity apart from Him.
- God wants me to love, pray and share His "call" with as many as possible.

### **Questions**

- 1) Which of these two Gods was taught to you as a child: the Loving Savior or the Sovereign Lord? What effect did that have on you? How did that affect the way you viewed yourself and others?
- 2) Has this passage been confusing to you in the past? Tell us how you would explain this passage to a young child.

## **Excerpt from *Preaching Through Romans*, “Trusting God’s Heart” (Romans 9:19-20)**

God plays by the same rules He sets for us. When He created and ordered the universe, He established not only physical laws; He also established moral laws. And His moral laws are absolute and unchanging because they express His unchanging character. God isn’t simply asking us to behave a certain way; He’s asking us to become like Him. This means that right and wrong are standards which apply not merely to us but to God Himself. He is not above His own moral laws, but of course, He has a vastly different perspective from ours.

Some people when reading this passage assume Paul is warning us that we dare not question God on matters of justice. After all, they say, He is God, so He can do anything He wants, and the way in which they say this seems to mean He can’t be held to the same moral standards to which He holds everybody else. But if that were true, He would be a tyrant. Tyrants are people who do what they want because they have so much power no one can stop them. Tyrants answer to no standards at all beyond their own desires. But the Bible pictures God very differently. It reveals a deity completely consistent with His own standards because they express His eternal character. So let’s listen again to Paul’s words and this time hear him call us to trust God, to drop our defenses and rest in His arms even when we don’t understand what He is doing.

### **What does Paul say?**

To understand the flow of Paul’s thought let’s begin at verse 14:

- v14 Paul anticipated someone challenging his claim that God does not award eternal life based on someone’s works. In verse 11 he said works had nothing to do with choosing Jacob over Esau. God made that choice based on His foreknowledge of Jacob’s faith, not on anything Jacob did, good or bad. To any of Paul’s readers trying to earn eternal life by obeying all the rules in the Law of Moses, this would seem unfair. After all, hadn’t God promised to bless those who obeyed His Law (Dt 30:15-20)? “Is God unjust?” they might ask, to which Paul answers, “Absolutely not!”
- v15 God has always given mercy to people who don’t deserve it. He told Moses no one had a right to demand mercy from Him, but then gave mercy to Israel even after they worshiped the golden calf.
- v16 The lesson we should learn from this is that no one can earn or deserve God’s mercy. He gives it as a gift to those who repent and believe. That’s God’s “purpose” and “choice” (v11) which He determined before He made the world.
- v17-18 There are also people to whom God doesn’t give mercy. It’s those like Pharaoh who stubbornly refuse to repent. When they reject Him, He rejects them by withdrawing His Spirit which leaves them in even greater darkness (“hardened”). As the Lord of unbelievers as well as believers, He reserves the right to use unbelievers to spread His gospel. He had used Pharaoh to increase His reputation in Egypt and the surrounding nations. And as Paul wrote this letter, He was using the violent hostility of some Jews to force Jewish believers to carry the gospel to responsive Gentile communities. In other words, God was using hardened hearts to serve His larger purposes.
- v19 Paul also expected someone to argue with him saying it would be unfair for God to punish people for the evil things they did after he hardened them. How could He find fault with those who violently persecuted believers when He was using their anger to spread the gospel? Let’s remember for a moment how personal this question is for Paul:
  - Acts 22:1-5, 17-22
  - Acts 22:6-11
  - 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul had been the most violent, “hardened” opponent of the gospel.

### **Does hardening cause sin?**

Those asking, “Why does He still find fault?” based their challenge on the assumption that hardening people meant God was making them do evil things. They must have pictured Him placing evil impulses into people’s minds and then judging them for doing the very things He prompted them to do. That of course would be unjust, but that was not what God was doing. Admittedly He was using their hostile actions to serve His own purposes, and admittedly He amplified the intensity of their anger by withdrawing more of His presence each time they rejected His call. Their flesh grew stronger and demonic influence less restrained, but none of that makes God responsible for their evil actions. “Who resists His will?” they ask. The truth is nearly everyone resists His will during this season of earth’s history including a third of the angels (Rev 12:4, 7-9) and even the earth He created (Ro 8:19-22).

### **Paul’s answer (Ro 9:20)**

As we listen to Paul’s response, we recognize he does not directly answer this moral challenge. Instead he asks a question of his own, “...who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded (plasma) will not say to the molder (The Greek: plasso), ‘Why did you make me like this?’ will it?” By asking this question he’s not warning us never to question God because He might get angry. He’s redirecting our attention back to God’s character and superior knowledge. He uses the illustration of a potter to remind us that God sees the world from a very different perspective from ours. As the Creator His knowledge is so superior to ours we are like clay trying to understand the potter. God knows far better than we what is just, loving and needed in a particular situation. So we would be wise to trust Him when we are confused about what He is doing rather than question His character. We can rest assured that He’s doing what’s best.

Basically Paul is asking those who are questioning God’s justice to be humble and trust Him, to stop accusing Him and reflect on who it is they are judging. Obviously their thinking is clouded by false assumptions about His character. They are sure He’s powerful, but they are not as confident He is just. And don’t we still struggle with those same issues today?

### **Are there two standards?**

Does God play by a different set of rules? Does being divine mean the standards of justice that He applies to us don’t apply to Him? Does His great power mean He is above His own Laws?

- First let’s listen to what God commands us: Deuteronomy 16:18-20.
- Now let’s listen to a conversation between Him and Abraham: Genesis 18:16-33.
  - “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?... Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”
  - Obviously a human can appeal to God based on a common understanding of justice. The plain principles of justice are not something beyond our comprehension.

### **God’s perspective**

Greater knowledge does not change right and wrong; it makes the distinction clearer. Yes, God’s omniscience gives Him a different perspective on reality, but it doesn’t give Him a different set of rules. Let’s reflect for a moment on His great knowledge:

- Psalm 8:3-4
- Isaiah 40:12-27

- Isaiah 55:8-9
- Job 38-41; 42:1-6

### **Unveiling God's heart**

Job was full of confusion when he tried to understand God based only on what he'd heard about Him, but that confusion went away when he actually "saw" Him for himself. The same is true for us. All doubts about the goodness of God went away when He revealed Himself to us in human flesh. In His Son we have seen His heart perfectly.

- John 1:14, 18
- John 14:9

This is the bottom line. I may not understand what's happening or why, but in the midst of my confusion I can still trust God. If I were as good and loving as He, if I were able to see the situation as He sees it, I hope I would do exactly what He's done (But be careful not to make Him responsible for something He hasn't done.).

### **Conclusion**

So when issues like Jacob and Esau, or the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, or the loss of a loved one, or the cause of natural disasters, or why wrong people win wars or elections or lawsuits confuse us, we don't have to question God's justice or blame Him for the evil things that happen. We can respond with humility and trust:

- We can be careful to interpret confusing passages of Scripture by the light of other clearer passages.
- We can maintain a "to be answered later" file. We don't have to wait to go on in our walk with God until some ethical confusion is cleared up.
- We can joyfully recognize that His knowledge is vastly beyond our understanding and trust that He will certainly do what is just and right.

We can respond this way because we have "seen" Him not just heard about Him with our ears.

### **Questions:**

- 1) Are there passages of Scripture that trouble you and make you question God's character? How have you responded?
- 2) Is there an area of your life where you are trusting God even though you don't understand what's going on? Tell us why you trust Him.