

ROMAN S
The Marvelous Mystery of Salvation
Romans 9:25-33

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Someone has said that half the world's problems are a result of semantics, and nowhere is this more true than in the area of biblical and theological problems. Christians often get "hung up" on technical terminology, and never really evaluate the terminology in light of their own experience. We hear certain terms and react to them emotionally rather than objectively, and we never really hear what is being said. I am thoroughly convinced that this is true in the areas of sovereign election and human responsibility, or "free will" as it is sometimes called.

Accordingly, it is my conviction that most Christians have better practice than theology, for I believe all Christians practice the sovereignty of God whether they realize it or not. For instance, I have never met a Christian who believed in freewill theology who also felt that he saved himself. Rather, they have all thanked God for the salvation bestowed on them. A Christian could never rightly thank God for salvation if he thought himself to be the cause of it. While the freewill thinker may not hold theologically to the sovereignty of God in salvation, he practices it daily. When he has to spell out logically and theologically what he practices, however, he often rejects it because it does not make sense to him or because it offends his sensibilities.

I am reminded of the conversation between Charles Simeon, a strong sovereign-election man, and John Wesley, an equally strong freewill:

"Sir," said Simeon to Wesley, "I understand that you are called an Arminian [freewill]; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist [sovereign election]; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions . . . Pray, sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?"

"Yes," said the veteran Wesley, "I do indeed."

"And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?"

"Yes, solely through Christ."

"But Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?"

“No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.”

“Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?”

“No.”

“What, then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother’s arms?”

“Yes, altogether.”

“And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto his heavenly kingdom?”

“Yes, I have no hope but in him.”

“Then, Sir, with your leave, I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.

SUMMARY OF ROMANS 9:6-24

In Romans 9, Paul shows that God will be faithful to the nation of Israel and fulfill all the covenants to her as stated in the Old Testament. But anyone who reads his Bible knows that God is now dealing with the Gentiles as well as with the Jews, and that both groups are included in the Church of Jesus Christ. Has God abandoned Israel? No! In his sovereignty, God is now dealing with Israel primarily in the context of the church, but one day in the future God will deal with the nation of Israel again according to his covenant with them.

Paul goes back into Jewish history to show how God has dealt sovereignly in the lives of individuals, proving that he has a right to set aside Israel as a nation if he pleases to do so. Paul also shows how God sovereignly chose Israel over Ishmael to be in his covenant of salvation. Then he shows how God sovereignly chose Jacob over Esau (twins) before they had done any good or evil, that the purpose of election might stand (9:11). He then uses the illustration of Pharaoh and Moses to show how Moses was an object of God’s mercy and grace, and how Pharaoh was an object of God’s wrath, “for God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy and whom he will he hardeneth.” God has a right to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor, and the moment we say that he does not have this right, we are saying that God is not sovereign, that he must give an account to his creatures for what he does.

While the Bible teaches that God sovereignly intervenes to save some men, it does not teach that he sovereignly intervenes to damn others. Men are lost because they are sinners, but they are saved because of God's mercy and grace. Had not God chosen to save some, all men would have been lost, for no man deserves salvation.

Let us suppose a wealthy Texas oilman decides he wants to adopt a child and to make him the heir of all that he possesses. Does he not have the right to do this? Now suppose he desires to adopt a son from Viet Nam, does he not have the right to choose one orphan and to leave thousands of others unadopted? Would anyone say that this man was unjust or unfair? No, we would praise him for his generosity and kindness in choosing even one. Does not God have the same right to choose some to salvation who absolutely deserve nothing from him? he most certainly does, and we praise him for choosing anyone!

Paul's point is that if God has sovereignly dealt with Israel in its past history, then he can sovereignly set the nation of Israel aside to bring salvation to the Gentiles and to the faithful remnant within national Israel. God has a right to do this no matter how the nation of Israel might protest.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN HIS DEALINGS WITH ISRAEL — Romans 9:25-29

Paul points out that God is now calling both Jews and Gentiles to salvation, not Jews only (9:24). What a blow to Jewish pride, for they looked upon Gentiles as dogs and vessels of dishonor. God is saving both Jews and Gentiles not on the basis of their works, but purely on the basis of his grace through the means of faith. If either a Jew or Gentile has salvation, it is the grace of God that has caused it!

“As he saith also in Osee, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of God.” Paul quotes from Hosea 2:23 and 1:10 to show how the Gentiles, who were excluded from God's covenant of salvation in the Old Testament, have now become special objects of salvation, and that those who are saved by grace through faith become part of the people of God. Whenever a Gentile turns to Jesus Christ, he is saved.

These verses tell us that there are many vessels of mercy or honor among the Gentiles. In the age in which we live, the vast majority of Christians are converted Gentiles, not Jews.

“Esaias also crieth concerning Israel, Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved: For he will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness: because a short work will the Lord make upon the earth.” Paul also quotes from Isaiah 10:22-23 to show that only the small elect remnant within national Israel has ever been saved. The remnant has been saved by grace through faith. Sadly, God has judged Israel as a

nation because of their rejection of their Messiah, and because of this rejection, the vast majority of Jews are vessels of wrath fit for destruction.

“And as Esaias said before, Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we had been as Sodoma, and been made like unto Gomorrha.” Now Paul quotes from Isaiah 1:9 to show that all Israel deserved to be damned, but God in his grace and mercy has saved a few, and this elect remnant is in the church today. There must be an elect remnant today if God is to be faithful to his promises to Israel in the Old Testament.

Practical Problems Related to Election: It is never right to teach on the sovereignty of God without relating it to some of the practical situations we face in life. Each of us has questions as to how God’s sovereignty works in our experience. Again I would like to emphasize that all Christians practice the sovereignty of God whether or not they hold to it theologically.

Does sovereign election take away man’s responsibility to believe? Absolutely not! The Bible teaches both God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. These are two irreconcilable truths to the human mind, but they are no problem to God. There is a mystery between the two. If we fail to acknowledge man’s responsibility, we have fatalism. If we fail to acknowledge God’s sovereignty, we have, for all practical purposes, atheism.

The paradox of man’s responsibility and God’s sovereignty has been compared to two nearly parallel lines which never converge in time, but which, if stretched far enough on into eternity, eventually meet. The lines of sovereignty and human responsibility do meet in eternity, and their converging point is God alone.

The Bible teaches both man’s responsibility and God’s sovereignty and we should accept both:

“And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed” (Luke 22:22).

“Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23).

“All that the Father giveth me shall come to me: and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).

“All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt.11:27, 28).

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12:13).

In eternity future all who are saved will be praising God for choosing them and for giving them saving grace, while the unsaved will have no one to blame but themselves for their own rejection of Christ. Further, in eternity only the saved man will have a right to complain, for he was saved when he willed not to be saved. At a time when he hated God, he was saved by God’s sovereign intervention in his life which altered his will. But the unsaved man has no right to complain about his eternal judgment because he is there by his own free will and choice. Henry Ward Beecher said, “The elect are the whosoever will and the non-elect are the whosoever won’t.”

Does not sovereign election make prayer ineffectual if all things have been planned out? Absolutely not. God, who has a plan, has included in his plan prayer as a means to bring about the ultimate end of the plan. Men ought always to pray, for without prayer no man will be saved. God has ordained prayer as a means of bringing about the salvation of a soul.

All Christians practice God’s sovereignty whether they realize it or not. On our knees we are all sovereignty folks. If we really believed in man’s total free will, then we would stop praying for the salvation of others, or for God to change circumstances in life which depend to some degree on the actions of others. If we really believed in man’s total free will, we would know that God could and/or would do nothing to save a person before that person believed by the power of his own free will. We would stop praying for people to make this decision. God’s hands would be tied, and the creature would be more powerful the Creator.

Have you ever asked God to save a person? Of course you have. You pray this because you believe that God is able to overrule in the lives of men and save them, for if he did not, none would be saved.

Does sovereign election kill one’s zeal for the evangelization of the lost? Absolutely not. Sovereign election, when properly understood, will make a Christian more faithful and diligent in his witness. He will come to understand that he is simply a witness to the unsaved, and that it is God’s job to do the saving. He will put more emphasis on faithfulness than on fruit. Soul winning fruit belongs to God, not man.

A man once came to Charles Spurgeon and said, “If I believed like you, Mr. Spurgeon, that God saved some and passed by others, I would give up preaching.” To this Spurgeon replied, “God has called me to preach his word and if I knew that all the elect had a yellow stripe painted down their backs, then I would give up preaching the gospel and go lift up shirt tails!”

Election assures the Christian that some will come to the Saviour. Without a concept of God’s sovereignty in election, there would be no assurance that anyone would ever come to Christ, and discouragement would be rampant.

When I witness to men, I am conscious of the fact that I am but an instrument in God's hands, but I know that if I will faithfully proclaim the gospel that some will come to Christ. It is my job to be faithful; it is God's job to save!

Once I was teaching a group of Campus Crusaders on the sovereignty of God in election, and one young lady came to me and said, "I could never accept that God does a complete work of salvation because he has elected some to salvation. It just isn't fair!" Yet this young lady admitted to me that she was defeated and discouraged in her witness for Christ. About a month later she came to me and said, "Mr. Arnold, guess what?" And I couldn't guess. She said, "I have discovered that God has given the Holy Spirit and he has come to do the work of reaching men for Christ through me." How thrilled she was that she learned that the Holy Spirit had to do the work of winning men. This had given her boldness in her witness and taught her to rest in God's faithfulness to save. She still didn't believe in election, but she was practicing the sovereignty of God because she recognized and relied upon the fact that the Spirit had to convert the lost. I never asked her why the Spirit moved on some and not on others because it only would have disturbed her. Yet, the reason ultimately is traced back to the sovereign purposes of God. Her practice was better than her theology.

Sovereign election will make one bold in his Christian witness, for he will realize that it is part of God's plan to use Christians to bring about the accomplishment of the rest of the plan, and that no human being can stop him because he is a person of destiny:

"And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region" (Acts 13:48-49).

"Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10).

Does sovereign election destroy hope for the salvation of loved ones? Absolutely not. How do we know any loved one will turn to Christ, either by free will or by sovereignty? We do not give up hope until they take their last gasp of air! We have no assurance either way. But those who believe in God's sovereignty know that God can save if he wills to do so.

When I first learned that my mother had incurable cancer and would probably die within a year, I was saddened because my mother was not saved. I remember that after I received the long distance phone call from California that I ran into my bedroom, tears streaming down my face, and threw myself prostrate over my bed and cried out to God, "Father. I know you don't have to save anyone and you are not obligated in any way to save my mother, but oh Father, I know that you are able to save Mom and I plead with you to do so." It was a shock to me when I received a phone call from my mother a few days later when she told me that she and Dad had professed Christ as their personal Saviour. He would have been just to condemn my mother, but in his grace God saw fit to save her, and I'm grateful!

If a loved one does die without Christ, where do men find their comfort? They find it not in the fact that the loved one is a rejector, for did not we pray for the salvation of that soul? Could not God answer our prayers? Had he no power? We would conclude that God either cared for the loved one but did not have the power to save him, or that God had the power to save but did not care. Yet, there is a third possibility, and this is where all Christians ultimately flee in a time of bereavement in the loss of a loved one. We know that God cared and has the power, but for reasons unknown to us it was not his will. We find comfort in the fact that God knows and understands the situation, and someday in eternity we will understand, for all things ultimately will bring glory to God.

ISRAEL'S RESPONSIBILITY IN REJECTION OF SALVATION — Romans 9:30-33

“What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness.” Israel felt that because of its great heritage from Abraham and the possession of the Mosaic Law, they had righteousness. They were trying to work their way to God. Consequently, they failed to see God's righteousness, which is only in Christ. The Gentiles, however, who had no great heritage, simply trusted in Christ and received a righteousness that made them acceptable to God.

“Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone: As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.” The Jews who wanted to work for their salvation became confused and stumbled over the salvation that is by grace through faith in the person of Christ.

Here Paul tells us that Israel's rejection is its own fault, not God's. Paul has been talking about God's sovereignty, but now talks about man's responsibility — both are true!

How many folks there are today who get hung up on a works salvation, never understanding that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. The harder a person works for salvation, the further he is removed from real salvation in Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have once again established the principle of God's sovereign choice in salvation. God declares that men are saved entirely by God himself, and that the only thing a man can do in order to be saved is believe that he cannot be saved by himself, and therefore turn to accept Christ who alone can save him.

Have you ever completely entrusted yourself to Christ for salvation, not trusting anything within yourself, not even your faith? If you have not, then you are like the Jews — you are hung up on a works system that cannot bring salvation. You do not understand that the forgiveness of sins and eternal life comes only by God's grace and is appropriated through one's faith in Jesus Christ.