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by Ray C. Stedman

There was a time when almost everybody on earth believed that the earth was flat. At that time, this was a very comfortable theory to live with. It was safe, easy to understand – it was comfortable. Now, believing this did not make it true, but it was easier to handle and it made life more predictable. In reading accounts of the time, we learn that people got rather upset when some evidence that this was not true was presented. As more and more scientists began to say that the earth was really round and not flat, contrary to the way it looked to their eyes, and that it was spinning on its axis and floating in a great sea of space, people got very upset. Religious people, especially, were upset, for they believed with all their heart that the Bible taught that the earth was flat. They would quote certain passages that seemed to indicate this. So there was a great deal of controversy over the issue. It was a long time before people began to realize that the new evidence really made God appear more wonderful and more powerful than he ever had before. They began to discover, too, that there were certain verses and passages which they had overlooked before that supported this new evidence. They could see how the old viewpoint could be fitted within the context of this new truth that was appearing.

You know, I think that is our problem when it comes to a passage like Romans 9. There are a lot of us who have grown up thinking that God is flat, that he is rather safe and easy to understand and that he fits very comfortably into the pattern that we have made for him. He is predictable, and we find ourselves very secure with these little theological boxes into which we have crammed God. But Romans 9 is the kind of passage that is designed to break through and kick the sides out of those kinds of boxes. I hope that is what has been happening to some of the boxes that you have tried to fit God into. God is greater than any human box we can design.

We have already learned that it is very easy for us to misread God's actions. We look at history, we look at what is happening in contemporary events, we look at what the Bible itself records about God's actions, and it is easy for us to misread those and to think that God is intending to do something that he really is not. That is what we have learned thus far in Romans 9. God gives us great opportunity; he gives us rich privileges. And when he gives us special blessings, we tend to jump to the conclusion that God has chosen us, that he likes us, that we have an inside track with God, for he likes us better than he does other people.

That was the problem the Jews had in Paul's day – and they still have it today, in many ways. They felt the same way we do. I think we in Christendom (although not necessarily the Church) tend to do the same thing when we point the finger at our Jewish friends and accuse them of being proud and conceited about their position before God.

Paul has already told us that God has a different reason for setting people up and giving them special privileges, and in the opening verses of Chapter 9 he has given us three principles that we must accept. They are the reasons God himself gives for his actions. These are the principles upon which he acts.

- Verse 1 tells us that God never bases redemption or salvation on natural privileges: inheritance, ancestry, education, opportunity. All these natural privileges, though they may be granted to an individual and may give him great access to knowledge about God, do not guarantee that a person is chosen of God.
- The second principle is that with those whom God chooses, God always precedes that choice in history with a divine promise of his activity on their behalf. God himself promises to act. He never bases salvation upon what human beings are going to do, except as they respond to what God does. We have to understand that. Redemption always has at the heart of it a promise that God has given and that we are to respond to. Paul makes that clear.
- Third, Paul points out that God's choice is never based on the behavior of individuals, whether good or bad. Now, that is the tough one. That is what we have a hard time believing. But Paul proves it in the case of Jacob and Esau, in which a choice was made before the boys were born, before they had opportunity to do anything, either good or bad. God made a choice. Therefore, salvation or redemption never is based on human works. We have seen that all the way through Romans, but here it is put in a very positive form.

Well then, what is the basis on which God chooses? If it is not works, if it is not the natural

advantages which he himself gives, then what is it? Paul's answer, which we take up now in the second half of Romans 9, is that it is based upon God's sovereign right to choose. God has a right to choose. That is the final resolution of that problem.

Let's hear what the Scriptures say on that, Verse 14:

**What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses,
"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."**

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. {Rom 9:14-18 NIV}

Now, I do not know how you react to that. I do not know what you feel about what it says – but it is clear what it says, isn't it? It does not say that salvation is based on human effort or human choice – it is God who chooses. I think that is very clear. You may not like what it says, but that is what it says. The ultimate reason for God's choice of anyone is that God chose him. He chooses whom he wants.

I think this is the truth about God which men dislike the most. We are having to face the fact that God is a sovereign being. He is not responsible to, or answerable to, anyone. He is totally, absolutely sovereign. We don't like that, because to us sovereignty is always connected with tyranny. To trust anyone with that kind of power is to put ourselves into the hands of someone who might destroy us, and we instinctively fight that.

We fight it in our national life, we fight it in our family life, we fight it in our individual relationships. We do not trust anyone with absolute power over us. The very Constitution of the United States is based on that presumption. No one can be trusted with absolute power. We have checks and balances built into our government. We divide it into three divisions and put one against the other, so that they all watch each other. We do not be-

lieve that even the best of us can be trusted with absolute power.

It is no wonder, therefore, that when we come to the Scriptures and confront the fact that God has absolute power, we become uneasy and troubled by this. But you see, if God had to give an answer to anyone, that being or person to whom God had to account would really be God. The very idea of God is that he is sovereign. He does what he pleases. He does what he wants to do. What we must do is get rid of the idea that his sovereignty is going to be destructive to us. It isn't at all. As we will see before this is over, his sovereignty is our only hope!

Paul says that God declares his own sovereignty. God says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion," {Exod 33:19 NIV}. Now, Moses was a great example of God's choice of someone to bless. Who was Moses that God should choose him? Moses was nobody in himself. He was a murderer; on one occasion, in a fit of temper, he killed a man. Then, instead of turning himself in for justice, he hid the body in the sand. He was a criminal, a murderer, a fugitive from justice. For forty years he had been living in the desert, a nobody. No one had heard of him. But God picked him up and made him a messenger of God and gave him a name that became known throughout history. He set him in authority over the greatest king the world had ever known at that time and used him in a most remarkable way. Why? God chose to do so. That was his elected choice. He had the right to do that.

On the other hand, God demonstrated his sovereignty with Pharaoh as well. He took a man who was no better than Moses (in fact, Scripture tells us God often puts in power the basest of men) and put him on a throne and gave him authority and power over all the nation of Egypt. Then, when Moses confronted him, God allowed Pharaoh to continue to resist God's will. God could have stopped him, but he didn't. He allowed him to do what all men do by nature – resist God. So Pharaoh held out against God in order, as this verse says, that God might demonstrate his power and attract the attention of men everywhere to his greatness.

That bothers us, too. We think anybody who boasts about his greatness, who tries constantly to get people to think about how great he is, is a braggart, he is conceited. We don't like such people –

largely because we are jealous of them! We want to be the one standing up there getting people to admire our greatness.

But you see, God is the one who must do this. In our constant tendency to think of God as nothing but an enlarged man, we attribute to God our own motives. When man does this, he is destructive. He must necessarily put others down in order to elevate himself. But what God does is necessary to the welfare and benefit of his creatures. The more his creatures understand the goodness and greatness and glory of God, the richer their lives will be, and the more they will enjoy life. Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent," {John 17:3 KJV}. So when God is inviting men, and seeking to find ways to have men think about his greatness, it is not because God's ego needs to be massaged – it is because God's creatures require that for their very welfare. Therefore God finds ways to do it, and he uses men even to resist his will in order that there might be an occasion to display his greatness and power. Paul's conclusion, therefore, is that God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Immediately somebody objects. We all feel this objection, I am sure. We object in the same words as Verse 19:

One of you will say to me, "Then why does God still blame us? For who can resist his will?" {Rom 9:19 NIV}

In that brief statement is hidden all the accusations and all the bitter charges that men bring against God: "God is the one responsible for all our human evil. It isn't us; it is God, ultimately, who is to blame!" This accusation appears in many different forms in human history.

What does man do with this essential truth about God's nature, his sovereignty? He uses it to blame God for all human evil. Verses 20-29 give us Paul's answer to this, and we will look at that in due time. But, right now, I want to spend a moment with this charge that men bring against God. What it is really saying is,

"All right, Paul. You say that God uses men for whatever he wants to use them for. Men cannot resist him. Pharaoh could not resist God's use of him. God used him to op-

pose what he sent Moses to do in Egypt. Pharaoh was merely an instrument in God's hands. So God uses men to do evil, then he turns around and blames them for the evil and punishes them for doing what he made them do! That's not just, that's not fair! God himself must agree that it is not fair to make somebody do something, and then punish them for doing it. The very sense of justice, which God himself gave us, is offended by that!"

That sounds logical, doesn't it? The logic of it sounds unanswerable. Many people argue this way. With calm reason and devastating logic they point out that Scripture teaches that God can use men however he wants, for good or for evil; therefore he has no right to condemn them or to punish them because they do evil.

How do you answer logic like that?

Let's see what Paul does. Paul has four things to say in reply, and let's examine them carefully:

1. The first one is found in Verse 20. Basically what he says here is, "All right, you man, whoever you are, you are going to charge God with injustice. You say he is not fair because he does this! Let's examine your credentials."

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" {Rom 9:20 NIV}

"Let's take a look at this," Paul says. "Let's compare and consider the difference between man and God. Here is man, finite (that means his knowledge is limited, his understanding is limited). He is not only finite, but he is frail. He has very limited strength. He only lasts a little while – a breath of air and he is gone. He is very weak, unable to do much. The record shows us through the whole course of man's history that not only is man finite and frail, but, despite all the logic that he seeks to employ, time and time again man demonstrates that he is foolish. With all his logic he makes atrocious blunders. He ends up doing things that are extremely hurtful when he thinks he is doing the right thing. With all this array of logic and of reason and ability to think, he ends up making the most foolish mis-

takes. Now, that kind of man is daring to stand up against the God who is infinite in knowledge, infinite in power and majesty, mighty, wise, knowing all things from beginning to end – not only all the things that are, but all the things that could be as well. This puny pip-squeak of a man is daring to stand up and challenge the justice of a God like that!"

What Paul is saying is that even our logic is wrong, because there are mysteries we do not reckon on, objectives that we cannot discern, there is resistance that we know nothing about. So who are you, man, to stand and question the rightness of God? That is a good argument, isn't it? Are we equipped to challenge God in this way?

I think the most helpful book in the Bible on this score is the book of Job. Job was not a cavalier; he was not a skeptic, an atheist arguing against God. He was a devout man who loved God deeply. Yet he was a deeply puzzled and bewildered man who could not understand what God was doing with him. You know the story. Job was afflicted with a series of terrible boils and physical afflictions, his family and all his wealth disappeared in a series of terrible catastrophes that came like a trip-hammer, one after the other. To top it all, he was afflicted by three torturers, who called themselves his friends, who came to argue with him in his pain and despair with the presupposition that all suffering must be caused by sin. Therefore Job's suffering meant that he somehow was a deep-dyed sinner, and all his pain was coming because he refused to let people know the terrible evil that he must have done. They hounded poor Job and examined every crack and cranny of this argument and searched it to its depths. Finally, in despair, Job cries out. He doesn't blame God though. That is the glory of this book. He never once blames God. He just says, "Lord, I don't understand it! Oh, if I could just come and stand before you and plead my case, I could show you how unfair it seems to me!"

So, in Chapters 38-41, God appears before Job and says, "All right, Job, you wanted a chance to argue. You wanted to ask me some questions – here I am. But before you ask me a few, I have some to ask you, to see if you are qualified to ask them of me. Here are my

questions: Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Where were you when the morning stars sang together, and I flung the heavens into space? Were you there? Where were you when all these things began to be worked out? Can you enter into the secrets of the sea? Do you understand how the rain works, and how the lightning appears? Do you understand these things, Job? Why, these are simple to me. How are you doing on them?"

Job has to hang his head.

God goes on: "Look at the stars, Job. Can you order their courses? Can you make the Pleiades shine forth in the springtime? Can you make Orion stride across the winter sky, always on time? Can you handle the universe, Job?"

And Job says, "No, I'm sorry; I don't qualify."

God says, "All right, let me ask you some more questions." Then, in a tremendous section that is really the key to the book of Job, God uses the figures of Behemoth and Leviathan, two strange and formidable creatures, to examine Job's qualifications to handle satanic power. "Can you handle Satan? Do you know how to handle this fantastic dragon who can wreck a third of the universe with his tail? Are you able to take him on?"

Finally Job ends up on his face in the dust before God and says, "Lord God, I didn't know what I was getting into! I just meant to say a few things to you, but you are not in my league at all! I repent in sackcloth and ashes; I put my hand on my mouth. I have nothing to say to a God like you."

That is Paul's argument here: "Who are you, O man, to reply against God? You don't understand even a tiny fraction of the things to be known, so how can you argue with a God like that?"

2. Paul's second argument follows: Even among men, isn't there a form of sovereignty that we exercise and don't we have the right to do so? Verse 21:

Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? {Rom 9:21 NIV}

Nobody questions that, do they? Doesn't a potter have the right to take the lump of clay that he is working with and divide it in half and make of one half a beautiful vase for the living room and out of the other make a slop jar? Why yes, he has that right. Nobody tells the potter what he can do with his clay. Men exercise sovereignty like that and nobody questions it at all.

Well, at this point many people say, "But we're not clay! It's all right to do that with unfeeling clay, but human beings are not clay. We're people. We have feelings, sensitivities, and wills. Your analogy doesn't hold!" Well, you can extend the analogy to things that have feelings.

What about the ways we treat plants and animals? Doesn't a gardener have the right to move plants around wherever he'd like?

Just last week I tore out some plants and threw them away – good, healthy plants. Did I have the right to do that? Do my neighbors have the right to swear out a warrant for my arrest because I didn't ask permission of the plants first? No.

Does a farmer have the right to send cattle to slaughter, to pick out certain ones that he thinks are nice and fat and slaughter them, while he keeps others awhile longer? Do we ever challenge that? No.

Men have that kind of authority – a kind of delegated sovereignty that they exercise.

When flies come into your kitchen, do you housewives have the right to swat them, or must you put up with their nuisance endlessly?

You folks who ate turkey for Thanksgiving, do you blame the poultryman because he planned to raise turkeys for that very purpose? Ought we to go over and picket his turkey farm because he did this? No, of course not.

Men exercise this kind of sovereignty. And if men exercise this delegated sovereignty, can we deny it to the one being who, in all the created universe, has the right, above all else? That is Paul's argument.

It is hard to answer that, isn't it?

3. "But," somebody says, "it still doesn't solve this problem of justice. It seems unfair." Paul's third argument says, "Then let us con-

sider two possible motives in God's actions."
Verse 22:

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea:

“I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,”

and,

“It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them,

‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” [Those are the Gentiles – us.]

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:

“Though the number of the Israelites should be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.

For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.”

{Rom 9:22-28 NIV}

What Paul is saying in all this is that God may have purposes and objectives that we do not see. And doesn't he have the right to do it? And what if one of those objectives is not only to display his power and his wrath by allowing and permitting man to oppose him and to resist him, but also to display his amazing patience and longsuffering this way? Did you ever think about that? Did you ever think of how, for centuries and centuries, God has put up with the snarling, nasty, blasphemous, accusing remarks of men, and has done nothing to them? He has listened to all the cheap, shoddy, vulgar things that men say about him, and allowed them to treat him with hostility and anger and never does a thing but patiently endure it and

put up with it. Paul says, “What if God does all that. What if it takes that kind of a display of the wrath of God and the patience of God to bring those of us whom he chooses to himself?” Something has to appear to us that makes us understand God. We are not being forced to come to him, we are drawn to him. Therefore we have to respond, and something must make us respond. Is it not the wrath of God and the patience of God that draws us on?

All this, then, is necessary to bring some of us to glory. In other words, for some to be saved, some must be lost. Now, I admit that is an inscrutable mystery. I don't understand it. But I don't have to understand it! That's the whole thing. I can't understand it at this point. There are factors in it which God cannot reveal. He will some day, but he doesn't now – not because he does not want to, but because I can't handle it. And neither can you. We have to accept it, nevertheless. Paul suggests here that without the display of wrath on God's part, no Gentiles ever would have been saved – only the elect of Israel, and only a remnant of them. But, as it is, the Gentiles, those of us who never had the advantages that Israel had, are included, as Hosea and Isaiah both predicted.

4. Now the final and clinching argument, the fourth one, is found in Verse 29:

It is just as Isaiah said previously:

“Unless the Lord All-powerful had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been like Gomorrah.” {Rom 9:29 NIV}

This past June we drove past the sites of Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't think there is a more desolate place on the face of the earth – just dreary, dry desert, with a briny sea in which nothing will live, and around which nothing will grow. It is the most terrible place of desolation on the face of the earth! What Paul argues here is that if God had not chosen to draw us to himself by an elective decree – something that makes men wake up and stop resisting him and start listening to him – none of us would ever be saved.

You see, we start thinking on this from the wrong premise. We start by thinking that everybody is in neutral, and unless they have an opportunity to be saved, they just remain in neutral until it is too late for them to have a chance. But that isn't it at all! The truth is, we were born lost. We are already lost. We were lost in Adam. Adam lost the race, not us. But we are victims of it. There isn't a chance that any of us will do anything but resist God. Paul has said in Chapter 3, "There is none that does good, no, not one! There is none that seeks after God, not one!" {cf, Rom 3:10-11}. So you see, God is not shutting us away and not giving us a chance. It is his grace that reaches out to us, and without it, nobody would ever be saved at all. The whole race would be lost. God's justice could allow the race to be lost; God's mercy reaches out to save many among us. And that is his sovereign choice! That is where we must leave it.

The passage closes with a very remarkable paragraph. People ask at this point, "How can we tell whether people are chosen or not? If you can't tell by the advantages they have, how can you tell?" Here is the answer (Verse 30):

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." As it is written:

"See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

{Rom 9:30-33 NIV}

God says there is a way you can tell whether you are being drawn by the Spirit unto salvation or whether you are being permitted by God to remain where you already were, lost and condemned: The way you can tell is by what you do with Jesus. God has planted a stone in the midst of society. Now, when you walk down a path and come to a big flat rock in the middle of the path, there are two

things you can do. You can stumble over it, or you can stand on it, one or the other. That is what God says Jesus is.

The Jews, who determined to work out their salvation on the basis of their own behavior, their own good works before God, stumbled over the stone. That is why the Jews rejected Jesus, and why they reject him to this day. They don't want to admit that they need a Savior, that they are not able to save themselves. No man is. But for those who see that they need a Savior, they have already been drawn by the Spirit of God, and awakened by his grace, and made to understand what is going on in their lives. Therefore, their very desire to be saved, the very expression of their need for a Savior causes them to accept Jesus. They stand upon that stone. Anyone who comes on that basis will never be put to shame.

Now that, God says, is the testing point. The crisis of humanity is Jesus:

- You can be very religious,
- You can spend hours and days or an entire lifetime of following religious pursuits and apparently honoring God, but the test will always come: What will you do with Jesus?
- God put him in the midst of human society to reveal
 - Those whom he has called, and
 - Those whom he has not.

Jesus taught this very plainly: "No man can come to me except my Father draw him," {cf, John 6:44}; and "all that my Father has given me shall come to me. Him that comes to me I will never, never cast out," {cf, John 6:37 KJV}.

So what is left for us? To respond to Jesus, that is all. And to thank God that, in doing so, we are not only doing what our own hearts and consciences urge us to do, but we are responding in obedience to the drawing of the elective Spirit of God, who, in mercy, has chosen to bring us out of a lost humanity.

Prayer:

Our Father, how this passage puts us in our place! How it makes us realize afresh

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how desperately dependent we are upon your saving grace. We did not save ourselves – we could not. We did not even initiate the desire to be saved – that comes from you. But we thank you that you have not left us, as you could have, in utter justice, to destroy ourselves and end, at last, in separation from all your goodness and

grace. But you have called us and redeemed us and brought us to yourself, at infinite cost to yourself, and thus, Lord, we give ourselves afresh to you this morning, that you may use our lives for whatever way you please, and that we may be the willing servants of a loving God. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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