

# **THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE** **(LESSON THIRTEEN)**

## **THE ELECTION OF GOD** **(PART 4)**

In our previous Lesson, we stated that **Romans 9** is perhaps the most forceful passage of scripture in the entire Word of God relative to the doctrines of predestination and election. In light of this, we commenced an examination of verses **6-24** of the chapter. We will continue our study in this Lesson.

In verses **14-16**, Paul writes, *“What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”*

The **New Living Translation** renders the verses as follows: *“Are we saying, then, that God was unfair? Of course not! For God said to Moses, ‘I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.’ So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it.”*

Verse **14** begins with a question, *“What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?”* or as the **New Living Translation** renders it *“Are we saying, then, that God was unfair?”* Why does the apostle ask this question? The apostle Paul was an experienced teacher who had probably expounded on the doctrines of God’s sovereignty, predestination and election on numerous occasions. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that he was aware of the areas which usually proved difficult for persons to understand. He would, therefore, have been able to anticipate the points that were likely to provoke opposition and therefore lead to questions.

In **verses 10-13** which we considered in our last Lesson, Paul had explained that God had made choice of Jacob over Esau before they were born and therefore, before either of them had done any good or evil. God’s choice had not been dependent on what they had or had not done. Paul had emphasized the point that God’s choice was dependent on His sovereignty alone. In verse **13**, he reminded them of what God had said in **Malachi 1:2-3**: *“Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.”*

Paul’s question in verse **14** makes it obvious that he expected his readers in the church at Rome, particularly the Jewish Christians, to find his argument problematic at best and offensive at worst. He anticipated that they would protest. He asked the question that he knew would have arisen in their minds based on his presentation: *“Is there unrighteousness with God?”* or to put it another way, *“Is God being fair?”* A very relevant question that we must ask ourselves at this point is *“Why did Paul anticipate that his readers would have a problem with what he had just explained concerning God’s choice of Jacob over Esau?”*

Remember that in our previous Lesson, we stated that the understanding of predestination that many persons have is that God, in eternity past, looked down through the corridors of time and saw that persons would either accept or reject Him, and that based on this prior knowledge, He elected those persons whom he knew would accept Him in the future and did not elect those whom he knew would not accept Him.

Now if that was indeed what Paul was teaching, and if that is what he thought his readers would understand him to be saying, then why did he anticipate that they would have found such a doctrine problematic? What reason would they have had to question the fairness of God’s action? They would have understood that God was merely rewarding those persons whom He knew would accept His offer of salvation in the future and not rewarding those persons whom He knew would reject His offer of salvation in the future. That seems to be absolutely fair! Every reasonable person should be able to appreciate that!

The truth is that when this particular view of predestination is presented today, no one questions the righteousness or the fairness of God!

But what if Paul was not teaching any such thing at all? What if he was not teaching that God's predestining, electing choice was, in the case of Jacob and Esau or in any case whatsoever, based on His foreknowledge of the future decisions and actions of people? What if he was in fact teaching the very thing that we have been teaching, that God's predestining, electing choice is dependent on nothing except His sovereign authority? What if he intended to convey the idea that nothing other than God's own good pleasure, informed His selection of Jacob over Esau? What if Paul is really teaching what the text says he is teaching, that God's choice of Jacob over Esau was to demonstrate *"that God chooses people according to his own purposes"* and for that reason only?

If this is indeed what Paul is teaching, then, it is not too difficult for us to understand the problems that his readers would have had with his doctrine. Paul himself expected them to have problems, based on his previous experiences while expounding this doctrine. It is likely that whenever Paul presented the doctrines of predestination and election in this way, the initial response of his audience was usually, "That is not fair!"

Brothers and sisters, when you teach that predestination and election are sovereign choices of Almighty God, made before persons have done any good or evil, made before they are even born, a choice that is not based on their future decisions or actions, but solely on God's sovereign authority, you must expect your hearers to say, "That does not seem fair," because, humanly speaking, it does not seem to be fair. I must confess that I am comforted when I consider that the questions that are raised concerning my view of predestination are the same ones that the great apostle Paul had to deal with! This suggests to me that perhaps the doctrine of predestination that I have come to believe and teach is the same doctrine of predestination that Paul believed and taught!

Again, beloved ones, let us suppose for argument's sake that Paul is teaching that God's predestining, electing choice is based on the future decisions and actions that He foreknows persons will make. If he anticipates that such an argument will be problematic, all he has to do is quickly explain that even though God's predestining, electing decision is made before persons are born and before they have done any good or evil, His decision is based upon His foreknowledge of the fact that those whom He elects will in the future accept Him and do well and those whom He does not elect will not accept Him and do well. This explanation would demonstrate that God acted fairly and the problem of his readers would be solved! But once again Paul does not do so. Why does he not do so? Because that is not his argument! Instead, Paul emphasizes God's divine prerogative to exercise mercy and compassion on whomever He decides to, without any regard to their present or future decisions or actions!

How does the apostle respond to the anticipated question, *"Is there unrighteousness with God?"* His answer is emphatic *"God forbid"* or *"Of course not!"* or *"Away with the thought!"* It is unthinkable that the holy God should ever commit an unrighteous act. The issue in such matters is not fairness or justice but a sovereign decision by God. Election is always totally a matter of grace. **If God acted only on the basis of righteousness, nobody would ever be saved.** In order to reinforce this truth, Paul quotes God's statement to Moses recorded in **Exodus 33:19**: *"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."* This statement clearly indicates that God's mercy and compassion are extended according to God's will and purpose, not according to the actions and decisions of human beings.

After giving his readers two examples of God sovereignty in predestination and election from the book of Genesis, Paul passes over a period of four hundred years and comes down to Moses at the time of the giving of the Law. The people of Israel had accepted a covenant of Law from God, saying, *"All that the Lord hath spoken we will do"* (**Exodus 19:8**). By uttering these words, they had bound themselves under the Law.

When they made and worshipped the golden calf crying, *“These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt”* (**Exodus 32:8**), they broke the covenant of Law and brought themselves into a place of condemnation.

In light of the rebellion of the people, God announced to Moses that He would destroy them all. We must appreciate that this would have been a righteous act on God’s part. If He had wiped out the children of Israel and raised up a new people, God would have been entirely just in doing so. They all deserved death and if they all perished, they would have perished righteously for they had sinned and *“the wages of sin is death”* (**Romans 6:23**). It is in just such a scenario that God said to Moses, *“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”* The statement was made to teach the great lesson of God’s absolute sovereignty. All of the people, including Aaron, were hopelessly undone. They were entirely lost. It is, then, that God announced that He would act for Himself. The whole nation deserved to be destroyed, yet only 3,000 perished - not because they were more wicked or less godly than those who were spared, but purely because of His grace and mercy. One commentator has observed that the doctrine of election was God’s secret weapon which made it possible for some men to be saved. If He had not retreated into His absolute sovereignty there would have been nothing but a curse and not even one individual would have been saved.

If any one of the Israelites had asked for justice, he or she would have been cut off immediately. The last thing in the world that any person could have desired was justice. Brothers and sisters, there is no sensible person in this place who would want anything to do with the justice of God. I want nothing but His grace, His mercy, and His compassion. The heart of every saved person in this place should be filled with gratitude to Jesus Christ our Lord for the fact that we will never have to encounter the justice of God. We should rejoice with a great deal of intensity when we read, *“Therefore, now, there is not even one bit of condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit, that of the life in Christ Jesus, freed you once for all from the law of the sinful nature and of death”* (**Romans 8:1-2 The New Testament: An Expanded Translation**).

There is no unrighteousness with God. It is unthinkable that God should be unjust. The only possible way that God could act in an unjust manner would be if He failed to judge sinners for their sins. **The whole point of this passage is that some persons receive a measure of mercy that others do not!** No one receives injustice. However, Ishmael, Esau and the three thousand Israelites who were destroyed were not selected as objects of divine mercy but the fact that they were not so selected does not represent an injustice against them because before they all were born they were all known by God to be fallen, unregenerate sinners.

Brothers and sisters, we must bear in mind that whenever God elects any person, He always does so in light of the fall. God only chooses fallen, unregenerate sinners for salvation because these are the only persons that exist! Grace is not injustice, for it comes to us through the cross of Jesus Christ. God always has and always will save persons on the basis of grace alone. He saves them based on the reasons of His own love, reasons which are hidden in the sovereignty of His own will. It is God’s right to grant His mercy upon whom He desires to grant it. And if He grants mercy to one, He is not obligated to grant it to the other. If we think that God is ever obligated to be merciful, we are not thinking about mercy anymore, because mercy by definition is not an obligation. Mercy is something that God does voluntarily.

Paul highlights this in verse **16**: *“So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy,”* or as the **New Living Translation** renders it, *“So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it.”*

There are many persons who believe that their salvation resulted, at least in part, from a decision that they made.

Verse **16** sets forth a categorical denial of any such thought. *“Therefore, then, it [this being the recipient of God’s mercy] is not of the one who desires nor even runs, but of the One who is merciful, God” (The New Testament: An Expanded Translation)*. As the great sovereign of the universe, God has the right to show mercy to whomever He chooses. In fact, He is not under obligation to extend mercy to anyone. Therefore, experiencing His mercy does not depend on how greatly a person desires it or how hard they work for it. It depends upon the predestinating, electing grace of God alone!

Brothers and sisters, in all honesty, this categorical statement by Paul should be enough to settle the debate once and for all. It is not possible for the apostle to be more decisive. In emphasizing this point, we can hardly do better than quote the words of the celebrated American theologian Albert Barnes (1798 –1870), regarding **Romans 9:16**:

**“[Not of him that willeth]** This does not mean that he that becomes a Christian, and is saved, does not choose eternal life; or is not made willing; or that he is compelled to enter heaven against his own choice. It is true that people by nature have no desire of holiness, and do not choose eternal life. But the effect of the influences of God’s Spirit on the heart is to make it *“willing in the day of his power;” Psalm 110:3*. The meaning here is evidently, that eternal life is not bestowed because man had any original willingness or disposition to be saved; it is not because he commences the work, and is himself disposed to it; but it is because God inclines him to it, and disposes him to seek for mercy, and then confers it in his own way. The word *“willeth”* here, denotes wish or desire.

**[Nor of him that runneth]** This denotes “strenuous, intense effort,” as when a man is anxious to obtain an object, or hastens from danger. The meaning is not that the sinner does not make an effort to be saved; nor that all who become Christians do not, in fact, strive to enter into the kingdom, or earnestly desire salvation, for the scriptures teach the contrary; **Luke 16:16; 13:24**. There is no effort more intense and persevering, no struggle more arduous or agonizing, than when a sinner seeks eternal life. Nor does it mean that they who strive in a proper way, and with proper effort, shall not obtain eternal life; **Matthew 7:7**. But the sense is:

1. That the sinner would not put forth any effort himself. If left to his own course, he would never seek to be saved.
2. That he is pardoned, not on account of his effort; not because he makes an exertion; but because God chooses to pardon him.

There is no merit in his anxiety, and prayers, and agony, on account of which God would forgive him; but he is still dependent on the mere mercy of God to save or destroy him at his will. The sinner, however anxious he may be, and however much or long he may strive, does not bring God under an obligation to pardon him any more than the condemned criminal, trembling with the fear of execution, and the consciousness of crime, lays the judge or the jury under an obligation to acquit him. This fact is of great importance for an awakened sinner to know. Deeply anxious he should be, but there is no merit in his distress. Pray he should, but there is no merit in his prayers. Weep and strive he may, but in this there is no ground of claim on God for pardon; and, after all, he is dependent on his mere sovereign mercy, as a lost, ruined, and helpless sinner, to be saved or lost at his will.

**[But of God that showeth mercy]** Salvation in its beginning, its progress, and its close, is of him. He has a right, therefore, to bestow it when and where he pleases. All our mercies flow from his mere love and compassion, and not from our deserts. The essential idea here is, that God is the original fountain of all the blessings of salvation.”

To all that Albert Barnes has written here, we say “amen.”

In our next Lesson, Lord willing, we shall consider Pharaoh and the hardening of his heart as an example of the sovereignty of God in predestination and election.