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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #40
November 14, 2021

**Arguing with God, or,
the Clay that Complained
Romans 9:14-23**

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., was professor of English at the University of Virginia for many years. As far as I know, he is still alive at the age of 93. His most famous book was titled, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Hirsch is convinced that there are certain facts and information that are foundational to literacy. He has in mind dates, events, people, and ideas with which you should be conversant if you hope to function properly in American culture.

If I ever have the opportunity to do so, I would like to write a book titled, *Biblical Literacy: What Every Christian Needs to Know*. Just as in culture generally, so also in the church specifically, there are certain facts and information, people, events, and ideas that you should know if you ever hope to flourish as a follower of Jesus and function properly as a member of a local church.

One of those ideas, truths, or doctrines that every Christian should know is the concept of divine election. As much as you may wish to avoid it, as much as you may think it unimportant, it is biblical. It is pervasive in Holy Scripture, and it is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. Therefore, in the interests of promoting biblical literacy, we have been examining this controversial issue over the past few weeks as it is found in Romans.

The interesting thing about Romans 9:14-23 is that Paul does not merely state in matter-of-fact fashion the doctrine of election. He pauses along the way to answer objections and protests that he knows people will throw at him. Two objections in particular are of immediate concern to Paul because they are protests that strike at the very character and goodness of God himself. The first objection to the concept of divine election and predestination is that, if it were true, God would be unjust or unrighteous. Paul answers this in Romans 9:14-18. The second objection, to which he responds in Romans 9:19-23, is that election would be mean that God is unfair.

*The First Objection:
God is Unjust/Unrighteous (vv. 14-18)*

The Human Objection (v. 14)

What in the world did Paul say in Romans 9:1-13 that might give somebody the impression that God is unjust? The answer is easy. It is Paul's assertion in vv. 11-13 that when God determines who will receive saving mercy and who will not, he does not base his decision on any human distinctives or achievements that a person may claim by birth or effort. When God chose Jacob instead of Esau, it was not because of anything foreseen or actual in either man. Again, "if God decides apart from anything in the human being whom he will choose and whom he will reject (v. 13), how can he still be 'righteous' [just] (v. 14) – and how can he blame people if they reject him (v. 19)" (Moo, 590).

If God is to be just and righteous, says the objection, he must choose one and reject the other based on something in the individuals themselves: race, color of skin, gender, hair color, works of self-sacrifice, generosity, goodness, keeping of the law, etc. To choose one but not the other before they were born and before they had done anything either good or bad, so goes the objection, is unjust. Not to take into consideration the deeds of mankind when assigning them their eternal destinies is unrighteous.

So, why *did* God choose Jacob and not Esau? Did God foresee in Jacob some righteous deed that would account for this special favor? Did God look down the corridors of time and see Jacob making the right choice and Esau making the wrong choice? Was it the foreseen “faith” of Jacob and its absence in Esau that accounts for his decision? If that is what Paul intended to teach, here would be the perfect opportunity to do so. If Paul had wanted us to believe that God chose Jacob because he foreknew from eternity past that Jacob, of his own free will, would choose God, why didn’t he say that? He could have easily put all objections to rest and silenced all God’s enemies by simply saying, “God loved and elected Jacob because he was better and more obedient and more trusting of me than Esau” or “God loved Jacob because God foreknew that he would exercise faith, whereas Esau didn’t.”

Instead, Paul doubles down on God’s free and sovereign choice. He says, as we saw in Romans 9:11, that “although they [Jacob and Esau] were not yet born and had done 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,” Rebekah, their mother, was told, “The older [Esau] will serve the younger [Jacob].”

Those who identify with the Arminian view of salvation argue that Paul isn’t talking here about individual or personal salvation. He’s only talking about the historical or earthly status of nations. But if that were the case, would any objection to God’s righteousness have been raised? If it were only a matter of national Israel being granted historical prominence, no objection to God’s righteousness would ever have been articulated. It makes sense that this objection arises in the human heart because Paul is talking about the salvation of individual souls. And don’t ever forget that the problem Paul is addressing in Romans 9:6-23 was raised in Romans 9:1-5. It was the lost, unsaved, unredeemed condition of his fellow Jews that threatened the integrity and trustworthiness of God’s word of promise. For Paul to assert the historical prominence and earthly service to which Israel as a nation was appointed does nothing to address the problem posed by widespread rejection of Jesus by the Jews in Paul’s day. ***It is individual salvation, not corporate service, that concerns the apostle.***

The Divine Reply (vv. 15-18)

Paul’s response to this protest comes in the form of two quotations of two OT texts, each of which is followed by a conclusion.

(1) first illustration: God’s Word to Moses in Exodus 33:19 (v. 15)

“And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name “The Lord.” And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy’” (Exod. 33:19).

This statement is a unique Hebrew mode of expression which emphasizes the sovereignty and freedom of the individual to perform the action that is in view. By simply repeating what the person proposes to do, emphasis is placed on the fact that he is going to do it apart from anyone other than himself and without consideration for anything other than his own will. It is God’s way of saying: “I’m going to do what I’m going to do!” So, when God says to Moses what we read in Exodus 33:19, he is saying that his decision to be merciful and compassionate is his decision alone. Neither any individual or any circumstance has any bearing or influence on God. It is an independent and sovereign choice on his part.

A closer look at the context of Exodus 33 reveals that this declaration by God is an explanation or interpretation of God’s own name and glory. God’s glory and name consist fundamentally in his showing mercy and grace sovereignly and freely. ***It is fundamental to God’s nature and glory to dispense saving mercy on whomever he pleases apart from any considerations outside God’s will, human or otherwise.*** I think, then, that God is saying: “My essence as God consists essentially in being free from any constraint originating outside my own will. This is the essence of what it means to be God” (John Piper).

If someone were to come to you and ask you to define God, what would you say? Among other things, you would be completely justified in saying, “To be God is to be sovereign in the bestowal of saving mercy and grace.” ***Far from it being unjust of God to elect sovereignly and unconditionally, that’s what being God is all about.*** If God can’t be sovereign in the salvation and condemnation of sinners, God can’t be God. To dispense mercy and compassion and grace based solely on his own good pleasure, and not based on anything man does, is absolutely essential to what it means to be God. In sum, God does not save or condemn because of constraints imposed on him by what humans do or will. God is altogether free and acts according to his own wise purposes to display the fullness of his glory.

(1) first conclusion (v. 16)

The word “it” in v. 16 is a reference back to God’s bestowal of mercy and compassion in v. 15. It also likely refers back to God’s choice of Jacob over Esau back in v. 11. God’s decision as to who will and who will not be saved by his mercy is not dependent on any human will or any human work. It is entirely and solely dependent on God and the sovereignty of his gracious and merciful choice.

This statement in v. 16 is the final word on whose will is ultimately decisive in the matter of salvation. Paul couldn’t have been any clearer: it is not the will of a man or a woman that is decisive; it is the merciful will of God alone. A more literal translation of v. 16 would be – “not of the one willing nor of the one running but of God who shows mercy.” Neither a decision of the human will nor an act of human effort accounts for why God elects people. It is due entirely to God’s merciful choice.

We must remember and keep in our minds the biblical fact that the will, desire, and choice of every man and woman is to reject, repudiate, and disbelieve the gospel. The problem isn’t that we don’t have a will by which we can make choices. The problem is that the human will is wicked! We will. We just don’t will well. So, don’t make the mistake of thinking that Paul is saying we don’t have to exercise our wills to believe in Jesus Christ. We do! What it means is that ***when you do will to place your faith in Christ, it is because God has himself already willed that you do so.*** It means that God has sovereignly decided to give you, a hell-deserving sinner, the desire and the ability to believe.

What this means is that if left to himself a man or a woman will invariably, inevitably, and without pause reject the truth of the gospel. No matter how civil or compassionate or industrious a person might otherwise be, he/she is utterly and willfully in opposition to all that Christ is, says, and does. Merely preaching to that person will accomplish nothing if God is not at work in their hearts. Charles Spurgeon put it this way:

“I might preach to you forever. I might borrow the eloquence of Demosthenes or of Cicero, but ye will not come unto Christ. I might beg of you on my knees, with tears in my eyes, and show you the horrors of hell and the joys of heaven, the sufficiency of Christ, and your own lost condition, but . . . none of you [would] come unto Christ of yourselves unless the Spirit that rested on Christ should draw you. It is true of all men in their natural condition that they will not come unto Christ” (*Free Will a Slave*, reprint ed.; Allentown, Penn.: Sword and Trowel, 1973, 17-18).

“But Sam. What has become of free will?” Good question. Let’s define free will. ***Your will is free to do whatever your heart desires.*** If you want to accept Christ, you will. If you want to reject Christ, you will. But apart from the work of the Spirit’s sovereign and supernatural grace in your heart, your desire will always be to reject and hate the gospel. All men freely and willingly reject the gospel because it is their desire to do so. ***To be “free” is to have the ability to act or choose in accordance with your heart’s desires without being compelled or coerced to do otherwise by someone or something external to yourself.***

Why is it, then, that as Jesus said in John 6:37-44, no person can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him? Is it because the Father or the Son or the Spirit prevents him from coming? No. Is it because God

says, “Sorry, but the quota of the elect is all filled up and you didn’t make the cut”? No. Is it because the persons of the Trinity have put an obstacle or barrier in the way of his exercising saving faith? No. No one comes because no one wants to. It is the nature of all mankind to flee from Christ and to reject him. Fallen human beings, apart from God’s grace, willingly and freely choose to stay in their sin and unbelief. They find nothing in Jesus Christ that is appealing or alluring. If such a person is to come, God, through the Spirit, must draw him/her. God, through the Spirit must regenerate the heart and open the eyes and mercifully awaken the sinner to the beauty and glory of who Jesus is and what is offered in the gospel.

(2) second illustration: God’s Word to Pharaoh in Exodus 9:16 (v. 17)

You know the story of the exodus, how the people of Israel were held in bondage in Egypt until God sent Moses to deliver them. What God did with Pharaoh is another, second, illustration of the principle that God is absolutely sovereign in deciding whom he will save. Here Paul refers to the OT text where God declared that he raised up Pharaoh onto the scene of human history and hardened his heart so that Pharaoh would not let the children of Israel go free. Why? Let’s look at the answer in Exodus. God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and command him to release the Israelites:

“But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them” (Exodus 7:3-5).

“For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in. And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord’” (Exodus 14:3-4).

God’s intent was that by hardening Pharaoh’s heart there might be an extended occasion for the multiplication of God’s signs and wonders. In this way the name of God would be exalted all the more. Pharaoh’s heart became the stage on which God displayed to the world his glory and sovereign power.

Also, and this is very important, God’s hardening of Pharaoh (or of anyone else, for that matter), is directed against a person who was already in rebellion against God and living in defiance and unbelief. “God’s hardening does not, then, *cause* spiritual insensitivity to the things of God; it maintains people in the state of sin that already characterizes them” (Moo, 599). Thus, we see that just as “God’s mercy is given to those who do not deserve it; his hardening affects those who have already by their sin deserved condemnation” (Moo, 600).

(2) second conclusion (v. 18)

Paul has cited Moses and Pharaoh as illustrations of the same point he made in vv. 10-13 about Jacob and Esau. Did God show mercy and compassion to Moses but not to Pharaoh because Moses was good and Pharaoh was bad? No. Like Jacob and Esau before them, neither Moses nor Pharaoh deserved anything but judgment. There was nothing that God might know or foresee in either of them that would influence his decision. His decision, as v. 18 makes clear, was based solely and sovereignly on his desire. Why did God desire to show mercy to Moses but not to Pharaoh? I don’t know.

If Moses had asked God why, God would have responded: “I have mercy on whom I will and I harden whom I will” (v. 18). If Pharaoh had asked the same question, he would have heard the same answer. Only God has the answer, and he hasn’t revealed it to us. He has only told us what the answer isn’t. He did this in v. 11 – it was “in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls.”

The Second Objection:

God is Unfair (vv. 19-23)

The Human Objection (v. 19)

The objection to Paul's theology, found in v. 19, is something like this. If a person's hardness of heart or insensibility to spiritual truth, like that of Pharaoh, is the result of God having hardened his heart, then it is unrighteous and unfair for God to condemn that individual. If Pharaoh could not resist the will of God to harden him, on what basis can God still find fault with him?

Consider also the spirit or attitude or mindset in which the objection is raised. The objection raised in v. 19 is not a humble inquiry on the part of an inquisitive student of theology, as if he were simply asking "How can these things be?" It is rather an *indignant* declaration and arrogant *protest* against God in which he insists that "these things *ought not* to be, and if they are, God is unrighteous!" As we will see, Paul's response in vv. 20-21 is quick and decisive.

Now, perhaps the person raising this objection has misunderstood Paul. Maybe Paul isn't saying any such thing in vv. 6-18. But if that were the case, surely Paul would have immediately clarified himself and set matters straight. If he thought he was going to be misunderstood in something so crucial as this, surely he would have paused to say something to the effect, "Oh, no, my friend. You have seriously misunderstood my argument. I did not intend to suggest that God is quite *that* sovereign." And yet, if anything, in vv. 20-23 Paul heightens and intensifies the absolute and unconditional character of God's will in dealing with fallen, hell-deserving men and women.

But isn't it true that people can and do, in fact, resist God's will? Didn't Pharaoh? True, but no one denies that men can say "No" to God's commands, even as did Pharaoh when he "resisted" God's command through Moses that he set free the children of Israel. God's revealed or moral will is often defied and disobeyed. But even that defiance and disobedience is part of God's secret or sovereign will. In other words, God often "wills" that his "will" be resisted. In *resisting* God's will of "precept" Pharaoh was *fulfilling* God's will of "decree."

Numerous texts of Scripture recognize a distinction between God's *preceptive will* and his *decretive will*. Consider Exodus 4:21-23 and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me.' If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son'"'"' (Exodus 4:21-23).

God, through Moses, commanded Pharaoh to let the people go. That is God's *preceptive will*, i.e., his will of precept or command. It is what God says *should* happen. Others refer to this as God's *revealed* will or his *moral* will. But God also says he will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will refuse to let the people go. That is God's *decretive will*, i.e., his will of decree or purpose. It is what God has ordained *shall* happen. It is also called his *hidden* will or *sovereign* will or *efficient* will. Thus, we see in Exodus that God commands Pharaoh to do something that God himself wills not to occur.

Thus, God's decretive will refers to the secret, all-encompassing divine purpose according to which he foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. His preceptive will refers to the commands and prohibitions in Scripture. ***One must reckon with the fact that God may decree what he has forbidden.*** That is to say, his decretive will may have ordained that event x *shall* occur, whereas Scripture, God's preceptive will, orders that event x *should not* occur.

Perhaps the best example is found in Acts 2:22-23 and 4:27-28. Here we see that in some sense God "willed" the delivering up of his Son while in another sense he "did not will" it because it was a sinful

thing for his executioners to do. The conspiracy of Herod, Pilate, and the Jewish religious leaders to lie about Jesus and kill him was profoundly sinful. Yet Luke tells us that they did precisely what God's "hand" and "plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:28). ***In one sense it was against God's revealed or moral "will" that Jesus be mistreated in this way, while in another sense it was God's sovereign and secret "will" that he be crucified.***

The Divine Reply (vv. 20-21)

As mere men, finite creatures with limited insight and wisdom, men who themselves are deserving of nothing other than judgment, we have no right to speak to God in this way. God is not a child whose hand you can slap and say, "No, no. You can't do it that way." Paul's rhetorical question, "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God," suggests quite clearly that to protest against what God does is insolent, arrogant, and reflects a failure to realize that you are but human and he is God. It is one thing for a human to object to what another human has done. But it is the height of presumption and pride for a finite man or woman to think that they know better than God, that their moral judgment on what is right and wrong surpasses that of the Creator himself.

Several years ago, a famous theologian (who will remain unnamed) said that an absolutely sovereign God "has a great deal for which to answer." But to whom must God answer? To whom must he give an account? And by what standard is God to be judged and assessed? Certainly there is no human so audacious as to insist that God must give an account of either his method or motivation in the salvation of sinners.

Paul is flabbergasted that any mere human being dares to offer advice to God. To the apostle's way of thinking that is as out of place as a statue advising "a sculptor how to chisel. The presumption that a man's sense of values is ultimate and can prevail against God's sense of values is as ludicrous to Paul as a ranting figurine" (Piper, *The Justification of God*, 166). The great and majestic statue of David does not speak back to Michelangelo in protest and say, "I don't like the way you've made me." For many years Ann worked in ceramics. She had a huge kiln in our garage and became quite good at creating and shaping a variety of animals, bunny rabbits in particular. At no time did one of them raise their voice in protest and say, "We're tired of being bunnies. We want to be horsies!"

Listen to Paul's response in vv. 20b-21. The thing being molded will not say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have sole authority over the clay to make one hell-deserving lump a vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? God has the undisputed right to give full and artistic display to all his attributes and skills as a craftsman by making vessels as he sees fit. The creature has no more of a right to protest how God dispenses with the creation than does a piece of clay have a right to dictate instructions to the potter.

Also, it's important that we recognize the parallel between v. 21 and vv. 22-23. So, when Paul speaks of making use of the same lump of clay, a reference to fallen humanity, one vessel for "honorable" use and another for "dishonorable" use (v. 21), he is talking about "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (v. 22) and "vessels of mercy" prepared beforehand for "glory" (v. 23). John Stott draws this conclusion:

"If therefore God hardens some, he is not being unjust, for that is what their sin deserves. If, on the other hand, he has compassion on some, he is not being unjust, for he is dealing with them in mercy. The wonder is not that some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all. For we deserve nothing at God's hand but judgment. If we receive what we deserve (which is judgment), or if we receive what we do not deserve (which is mercy), in neither case is God unjust. If therefore anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God's" (269-70).

The Divine Reason (vv.22-23)

These final two verses in our study of Romans 9:14-23 are a challenge for us all. I will be the first to say that they run counter to both the religious and secular instincts of men and women. But this is God, speaking through Paul, explaining why he does what he does. We may not like it. We may not agree with it. We may not even understand it well enough to form an opinion on it. But if God says it, it is true. And God's truth is good and righteous and holy and loving and is designed for our spiritual strengthening and growth. So, what does Paul say here? He provides us with three reasons why the doctrine of unconditional election is what it is. In the process he also explains why God permits people to live in defiance of him. It explains why it is not God's sovereign, secret, or decretive will to save all mankind.

We read in v. 22 that God has "*endured with much patience*" vessels of wrath. Apparently, God is patiently holding back immediate judgment so that the unbelieving people of the world might continue to store up wrath for themselves and in this way make possible an even greater display of God's power and judgment (see Rom. 2:4-5). It would have been perfectly just for God to destroy every unbeliever immediately. In dealing with Pharaoh, God endured his repeated refusal to let the people go in order that he might turn each occasion into an opportunity to display his power (Ex. 14:1-4,14). Also, with a greater measure of sin comes a greater display of wrath, which in turn sheds an even greater light on the glory of mercy towards those who themselves deserved judgment no less than the others.

So, why then does God do things the way he does? What accounts for all we've read in vv. 6-21?

First, God wants to show or demonstrate the reality of his wrath (v. 22a). He wants all to see and understand that human sin and idolatry and unbelief are the fault only of people and that they are deserving of his judgment. He wants us all to stand in awe of his holy justice.

Second, God wants to make his power known to all (v. 22b). This is most likely the power he exerts when he judges those who are unrighteous and deserving of eternal judgment.

Although the unbeliever ought to immediately suffer judgment, God patiently endures their on-going idolatry, immorality, and unbelief so that he might make known all the better and with even greater clarity the majesty of his undeserved mercy shed abroad on those whom he has chosen to inherit eternal life. Note also that both the wrath and judgment of the unbeliever was something previously "prepared" as was the mercy that he desired to show to those who would believe.

Third, he wants to make known the "riches of his glory" in saving otherwise hell-deserving sinners (v. 23). The majesty of his saving grace and mercy is best seen in contrast with the judgment of the lost. If God mercifully saves some, even though they are as deserving of eternal death as all others, the majesty of his grace is magnified. None of us deserves to be a Christian. None of us deserves to be chosen by God. It is altogether and entirely an act of God's mercy and grace. Nothing we have done exerted an influence on God to make the decision he made. We were "prepared beforehand for glory" (v. 23), which is to say, it happened in eternity past, so that God would be magnified and praised for his sovereignty. The words "prepared beforehand" are most likely another way of describing our having been "predestined" (8:29).

God's plan and ultimate purpose in creating the world was so that the entire range or panorama of his attributes might be displayed for all to see and marvel. In this way God was seeking his own glory. His reason for saving some by his sovereign mercy and judging others in righteousness and wrath was so that his majesty might be revealed and his glory might be known. God's ultimate aim in creation and salvation and judgment is the manifestation and display of his incomparable glory. This is the God-centeredness of God. That is why Paul concludes Romans 9-11 with these stunning words:

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has

been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:33-36).

*Addendum:
Individuals or Nations?*

The Arminian insists that Isaac and Jacob are not examples of individual men elected to eternal life, but are representative of the nation Israel collectively and its privileged status above all other nations of the earth. Or, if they are to be taken as individuals, it is to honor and historical prominence, not eternal life, that they are predestined. Ishmael and Esau could still be saved. For that matter, Isaac and Jacob could still be lost.

In support of this view appeal is made to the fact that two of the Old Testament texts which Paul cites (Gen. 25:23; Mal. 1:1-5) refer to Jacob and Esau as heads of national entities and their respective historical destinies. God chose Jacob to be more prominent and privileged, the line through whom the promised seed would come, even though Esau was the elder of the two. But that has nothing to do with whether either or both of the men go to heaven. The name "Jacob" can refer not only to the individual but to the nation (Israel) descended from him. Likewise, the name "Esau" can refer both to the person himself and the people (Edom) who are his descendants

But how does this relate to the problem raised in verses 1-5? Whatever it is that Paul means by referring to Jacob and Esau, *he intends for it to solve the problem posed in the preceding context.* Paul is clearly burdened by the fact that individual Jewish men and women are accursed and cut off from Christ. It is their unsaved, lost condition that has created the problem that he seeks to address.

It seems, then, that in verses 6-23 Paul is describing a divine principle in order to apply it to the problem of verses 1-5. The principle is that "God's promised blessings are never enjoyed on the basis of what a person is by birth or by works, but only on the basis of God's sovereign, free predestination (Rom. 9:11-12). The ultimate decision of who will experience God's grace or mercy is never based on a person's 'willing or running' (Rom. 9:18)" (Piper. 46). I readily concede that when Paul turns to demonstrate this principle, he uses two Old Testament texts that do not immediately pertain to personal salvation. But when that principle is then applied, why should it be restricted only to God's choice of individuals and nations for earthly, historical roles? The reason why Paul cited Malachi 1:2-3 is not hard to discern. Doug Moo explains:

"In a context in which Paul begins speaking rather clearly about the individuals rather than the nations, we should not be surprised that he would apply a text that spoke to the nations to the individuals who founded and, in a sense 'embodied' them. It is not the issue of how God uses different individuals or nations in accomplishing his purposes that is Paul's concern, but which individuals, and on what basis, belong to God's covenant people. . . . [Thus] Paul appeals to OT history to establish a principle about the way in which God brings into being his own people" (586).

Let me try to simplify matters. We must remember that Paul's grief in verses 1-5 is over the eternal condemnation of individual Jews. How can so few ethnic Israelites be saved and so many lost because of unbelief if God's word is true? That is the problem. Consequently, the solution that verses 6-23 provide must address the issue of individual, eternal salvation and condemnation.

But how does an appeal to the collective election of Israel or the election of Jacob and his seed to earthly, historical prominence solve the problem of unbelieving, eternally lost Jews? How can *that* solve the problem when *that is* the problem? In other words, it was the fact that ethnic Israel as a whole was God's chosen, covenant people that created the problem in the first place (vv. 4-5).

If all individual Israelites are God's covenant people, why are so many individual Israelites accursed and separated from Christ? Simply to reaffirm that God has elected the entire nation collectively and destined it for historical prominence is no answer: That is the problem! Paul wants to explain why not all individual ethnic Israelites are eternally saved (their lost condition being the source of his overwhelming grief). What possible benefit would it be to assert that the line of Jacob, but not Esau, was elected to be the beneficiary of mere earthly, non-saving, non-redemptive, purely national covenant blessings?

I do not see how an appeal to the historical, earthly prominence of anyone answers the question of why so few of God's old covenant theocratic people are eternally lost and excluded from the blessings of heaven. If God's choice of Isaac instead of Ishmael and of Jacob instead of Esau has nothing to do with their individual and eternal destinies, how then does it have any application to the problem of the individual and eternal destinies of so many Jews?

It seems evident to me that Paul solves the problem by appealing to a principle according to which God always operates. The principle was manifest in the election and elevation of Jacob over Esau and explains why not all physical Israelites are spiritual Israelites. The principle, again, is this: *When God determines who shall and who shall not enjoy his blessings, be they earthly or heavenly, he does so according to his sovereign good pleasure and not according to anything in men.*

In addition to this, Thomas Schreiner has articulated several reasons why Paul is talking about individual, not national, election (“Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation? Some Exegetical And Theological Reflections” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (36/1 [March 1993] pp. 25-40.)

For example, the phrases “children of God” and “children of the promise” always refer in Paul to those who are the saved children of God (see especially Romans 8:16,21; Phil. 2:15; Gal. 4:28). We should also note that Paul says God's election is not based “on works but on the one who calls” (v. 11). As Schreiner points out, “elsewhere when Paul speaks of 'works' he refers again and again to the thesis that no one can be justified by doing 'the works of the law' or by doing any works at all (cf. 3:20,27-28; 4:2,6; 9:32; 11:6; Gal. 2:16; 3:2,5,10; Eph. 2:9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5). Since Paul typically claims that salvation is not by works, the burden of proof is on those who see him employing this terminology in a non-salvific way in Rom. 9:11-12” (28).

Schreiner also directs us to the parallels between Romans 9:11-12 and 2 Timothy 1:9. “The parallels between the texts are at least fourfold: (1) Both speak of God's 'call' (*kaleo*); (2) both stress that the call was not based on 'works' (*erga*); (3) both refer to God's saving 'purpose' (*prothesis*); (4) both say that this salvation was decided before human history began” (28-29). Since no one denies that eternal salvation is in view in 2 Timothy 1:9, it stands to reason he is talking about it also in Romans 9:11-12.

Romans 9:22-23 also suggests that Paul is speaking of salvation and condemnation in 9:11-12. In vv. 22-23 he contrasts “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” with “vessels of mercy that were prepared beforehand for glory.” The word for “destruction” (*apoleia*) and that for “glory” (*doxa*) frequently are used by Paul to refer to eternal condemnation and eternal salvation (see Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 6:9; Rom. 2:10; 8:18; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Tim. 2:10).

The wider context of Romans 10-11 also supports the view that Romans 9 is talking about eternal salvation. The point of Paul's argument in chapters 10-11 is the *salvation* of Israel. If Romans 9-11 is a literary unit, as most argue it is, the burden of proof rests on those who insist that chapter 9 is dealing with an entirely different subject from chapters 10-11. Schreiner explains:

“It seems clear that 9:30-11:36 relates to Israel's salvation (or lack thereof), but it seems to me that the implications of this fact need to be related to 9:1-29. Given the fact that Romans 9-11 is a unit, that there is no reason to think his major concern changes, and that there is specific evidence that Paul's concern is with Israel's salvation in 9:1-29, it is not surprising that Paul would describe

in 9:30-11:36 why Israel fails to obtain salvation. It is quite improbable that in one context Paul is merely discussing the temporal destiny of Israel (9:6b-29) and that then in the succeeding passage he suddenly begins to explain why Israel failed to attain salvation (9:30-11:36). The unity of the text is such that all of Romans 9-11 constitutes Paul's answer as to how God's word has not failed with reference to the promises of salvation for Israel, even though many in Israel have not believed in Jesus as Messiah" (31).

One more observation is in order. Once again, some persist in arguing that Paul's reference to "hardening" here pertains not to salvation or eternal destiny but to one's role or place in the historical process. In addition to the multitude of arguments already cited as to why that cannot be the case, Moo writes this:

"First, structural and linguistic considerations show that v. 18 is closely related to vv. 22-23, where the 'vessels of mercy, destined to glory' are contrasted with 'vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction.' As God's mercy leads to the enjoyment of glory, God's hardening brings wrath and destruction. Second, the word group 'harden' is consistently used in Scripture to depict a spiritual condition that renders one unreceptive and disobedient to God and his word. Third, while the Greek word is a different one, most scholars recognize that Paul's references to Israel's 'hardening' in Rom. 11:7 and 25 are parallel to the hardening here. Yet the hardening in Rom. 11 is a condition that excludes people from salvation. Fourth, it is even possible that the references to Pharaoh's hardening in Exodus carry implications for his own spiritual state and destiny" (596-97).

As with so much else that has preceded in 9:1-18, many commentators find in vv. 20-21 a reference to *national or corporate* entities and not to individuals and their eternal destinies. For example, it is argued that the OT texts quoted in vv. 20-21 (Isa. 45:9-11; Jer. 18:1-6) deal with the *nation* Israel, not individuals. But it must be noted that Paul is employing a common metaphor and need not apply it precisely the same way as does another biblical author. Furthermore, it is more likely that the passage from which he derives the metaphor is *Isaiah 29:16* which does have reference to individuals.

We should also take note of v. 24 in which the "vessels of mercy" (v. 23) are identified as those who have been called "*from among*" Jews and "*from among*" Gentiles. "Since the vessels of mercy consist of Jewish individuals and Gentile individuals, there is no basis for arguing that Paul's contrast between vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath . . . is a contrast between nations" (Piper, 181).

Others argue that Paul must be referring to national entities and not to individuals because "no potter makes a vessel just to destroy it." But this ignores the obvious parallel between v. 21 and v. 22. The vessel made for common use in v. 21 = the vessels prepared for destruction in v. 22. Therefore, *common use* and *destruction* are synonymous. Also, to say that a potter does not make a vessel simply to "destroy" it is based on a misconception of "destruction". By this term Paul does not mean extinction but eternal condemnation. "Destruction is not the opposite of existence; it is the opposite of *glorious* existence (9:22f.). And that is all that the metaphor of 9:21 requires. If *apoleia* means an eternal inglorious existence in hell, then the objection that God could not make persons for such *apoleia*, since potters do not do that sort of thing, is not true. For potters do make vessels which are fit for inglorious uses outside the house" (Piper, 183).

Several commentators also point out that the word translated "destruction" (*apoleia*) is always used by Paul to refer to final condemnation (Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 6:9; the cognate verb [*apollumi*] is used this way in Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3; note especially the contrasts between this word and salvation in Phil. 1:28; 1 Cor. 1:18; and 2 Cor. 2:15). Note also that the objection in v. 19 to which v. 20 is addressed is formulated with reference to an *individual*: "Who can resist his will?" The objector perceives correctly that *individual* accountability is in view when he asks: "Why does God still find fault?"