

God's Gracious Choice: An Exegetical Study of the Doctrine of Election from Romans 9:10-24

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This past summer I had my first experience in trying to offer comfort to a family of our church whose adult child had committed suicide. The child had seemed to have all the opportunities a person could have for exposure to the grace, comfort, and power of the gospel. He was born into a family which was active in church and Bible study. He had attended Lutheran elementary school. His personal library included a copy of the Book of Concord, as well as other Lutheran devotional and doctrinal books and commentaries. His family took active steps to express concern for his spiritual welfare, to share the gospel with him, and to contact an area pastor when he started to drift in his faith while away at graduate school. The advantages he had were no less significant than those listed by the Apostle Paul for the people of Israel in Romans 9:45. "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!" At the time of the tragedy, with the comfort of the resurrection in this case all but lost, it seemed best to point the family to the comfort of a portion of Romans other than the one we will be considering today—the promise that, no matter what happens to us or around us, nothing can separate US from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31ff.).

Such events, however, inevitably bring to mind the old question "why?" Why is it that some are saved and some are not? Why does the same gospel turn some to faith and eternal life while others flatly reject it or gradually give it up? The apostle Paul addressed the same sort of questions as the Holy Spirit inspired him to pen the words of Romans 9, 10, and 11. We must wrestle with them in our study, too. In verses 10-24 of Romans chapter 9 Paul will explain and defend **God's Gracious Choice**, a choice we may not be able to fathom, but a choice which nevertheless makes our salvation sure by ascribing all of it to God's grace.

10 οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ Ῥεβέκκα ἐξ ἑνὸς κοίτην ἔχουσα, Ἰσαὰκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν·

"And not only so, but also Rebecca, who was pregnant by one man, our father Isaac..."

This sentence, once begun by Paul, is never finished grammatically. One might supply something like "provides an example" to finish the thought. The words οὐ μόνον δέ serve to connect this sentence to what precedes as yet another example or proof of Paul's explanation. What is Paul explaining? Paul begins chapter nine of Romans by lamenting that the nation of Israel, despite all the advantages God had given them, had rejected the Messiah. Yet he understands that being a true child of God, a part of the "true" Israel, is more than a matter of race, nationality, or natural birth. In the preceding verses Paul has cited the miraculous birth of Isaac from barren Sarah and aged Abraham as Scriptural evidence that the real children of Abraham are not just those who have descended from him naturally. They are those whom God chooses and makes his children by fulfilling his promise, something which he does by supernatural means. Isaac and his children were the children of the promise, and God had to bring about their existence with nothing less than a miracle. Their place in God's family was the Lord's work and choice, not something merely natural, not something they did on their own.

But someone still might claim that the Lord somehow "owed" Isaac this choice—that he was obligated to choose Isaac. "Up to now you might say that there was a good reason why Isaac was chosen. Ishmael and the

other sons of Abraham were not sons of Sarah. So Isaac was the real son.”¹ Now Paul turns to another proof of this principal that people become God’s children and heirs of the promise by the Lord’s gracious intervention and choice, not by human effort or choice.

The family of Isaac and Rebecca illustrates the apostle’s point well. While Abraham’s children were born to several different mothers, Paul could say of Rebecca, “ἕξ ἑνὸς κοίτην ἔχουσα,” “who was pregnant by one man.” This attributive participle modifying Ῥεβέκκα and its accompanying phrase literally say, “having a bed from one man.” The idiom drives home the point that Rebecca had been sexually faithful to “our father Isaac,” that Esau and Jacob had exactly the same parents, and that there was therefore no **human** reason to distinguish between them. Neither could claim a superior parentage.

Paul’s reference to Isaac as “our father” is also a subtle way in which he is advancing his argument that we become God’s children by his gracious choice, not by human effort or natural membership in one race or nation. The congregation to whom Paul was writing in Rome was not entirely Jewish, probably not primarily Jewish. In fact, he seems to be addressing primarily Gentiles in this portion of Romans when he refers to the Israelites in 9:3 as “my brothers” not “our brothers.” But Isaac, he says, is “our father.” The Gentiles in Rome were not natural descendants of Isaac. They were heirs of the same faith, however, and spiritual descendants in the family of God.

Having established that neither Esau nor Jacob had a superior parentage, Paul goes on to explain that God’s choice was also made before either one had done anything to earn his favor.

11 μήτω γὰρ γεννηθέντων μηδὲ πραξάντων τι ἀγαθὸν ἢ φαῦλον, ἵνα ἡ κατ’ ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις τοῦ θεοῦ μένη

“For although they had not yet been born, neither had they done anything good or evil, so that the purpose of God concerning election might stand...”

With the word γὰρ Paul is offering an explanation or expansion of the thoughts he began in the previous verse concerning the children of Isaac and Rebecca. The two aorist participles γεννηθέντων and πραξάντων are genitives as part of a genitive absolute clause. The subject is not specifically mentioned, but the clause obviously refers to Esau and Jacob. While I have translated the clause with a concessive (“although”), one could also make it a temporal clause by using the negatives to indicate time before: “For before they had been born...”

The two aorist participial phrases simply take us into the past, before the action of the main verb (which is coming up in verse 12). God’s decisions concerning Jacob and Esau had taken place before they were born. If they had not yet been born, it is obvious that they could not have done anything to earn God’s favor or disfavor, either. Jacob had done nothing to encourage God to choose him. Esau had done nothing to discourage God from choosing him. Neither one had done anything ἀγαθόν, that is, morally good, or φαῦλον, that is, evil in the sense of something that cannot produce any true gain, something which is worthless.² Everything that might possibly be used to distinguish these two men was excluded from God’s sight when he made his choice.

In other words, the story of Jacob and Esau once again illustrates that God’s choice in no way rests upon a difference in man. These brothers had the same human ancestry. They didn’t even have any deeds to look at, no previous record of right or wrong, when God made his choice in eternity. This all leads to the conclusion: “So that the purpose of God concerning election might stand.” Before we look at this clause as a whole, we first need to understand what is meant by “ἡ κατ’ ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις τοῦ θεοῦ,” “the purpose of God concerning

¹ Becker, Siegbert. *Commentary on Romans*. A Transcript of Dr. S. Becker’s Lectures On Romans by Gerhold Lemke. (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 1992), p. 86.

² Trench, Richard Chenevix, *Synonyms of the New Testament*. Edited by Robert G. Hoerber. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 331.

election.” *πρόθεσις* is what God has decided, what God set forth, the purposes for things which God has established. Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich suggests that the preposition *κατ’* in this verse is really a substitute for the genitive.³ But Paul is discussing the purpose of election, not in the sense of what God uses election to do—save souls and accomplish his plans. Rather, the “purpose of election” refers to the reason God has for operating in this manner, the reason God does it this way rather than some other way.

With this in mind, we can look at the clause as a whole. The word *ἵνα* plus the subjunctive *μένη* seems to make more sense here as a result clause than a purpose clause. It’s not so much that God did things this way with the purpose of keeping his doctrine of election in tact. His goal in working with Jacob and Esau was not to support election as an abstract doctrine. Rather, God operates according to the doctrine of election, he chooses Jacob before he or Esau had done anything or were even born, and as a result his reason for doing things this way also continues to stand. That reason or purpose is defined for us in the following verse:

12 οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος, ἐρρέθη αὐτῇ ὅτι Ὁ μείζων δουλεύσει τῷ ἐλάσσονι
 “...not from works but from the one who calls, it was said to her, ‘the older will serve the younger.’”

“Not from works but from the one who calls.” That is why God has decided to use an election of grace. That is its purpose—to assure us that God’s choice doesn’t originate with our works but simply with God himself. Purer words of Gospel could not be spoken. The point of election is to drive home to us once more that our salvation does not have its source in our own works (*ἐξ ἔργων*—gen. of source). The focus is not on man. My own human failing to keep God’s law is no longer to terrify me when election is mentioned. The point is rather that everything about it has its source in the God who calls us to faith (*ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος*). It is purely a matter of grace, a topic which Paul has been highlighting again and again throughout this letter to the Romans. We need not bother ourselves about whether we have what it takes, whether we have been good enough, whether we are God’s kind. Our election was entirely something in the God who called us.

It’s interesting that already in these words of the text, John Calvin begins to see a double predestination. But even a couple of commentators from the Calvin influenced Church of England state: “...nothing is said in this passage about anything except ‘election’ or ‘calling’ to the kingdom. The gloss of Calvin *dum alios ad salutem praedestinat, alios ad aeternum damnationem* is nowhere implied in the text.”⁴

At this point, Paul finally finishes a sentence. “(For although they were not yet born...etc.) it was said to her, ‘The older will serve the younger.’” Here we finally have the quote which expresses why Jacob and Esau serve as such a clear proof that God elects by grace. With the future tense verb *δουλεύσει*, the Lord is predicting the future relationship between the descendants of Jacob and Esau which will result from his choice of one of these two brothers. The comparative adjectives *μείζων* and *ἐλάσσονι*, “greater” and “smaller,” refer to the respective ages of Esau and Jacob. If nothing else distinguished these brothers, one might expect that Esau and his descendants would enjoy the position of prominence in the family because he was the older brother. Even this God did not take into account when he made his choice. The Lord’s prophecy to Rebecca in Genesis 25:23 makes it clear that he acted in absolute independence, not being influenced by any earthly circumstances when he made his decision.

Now we come to a verse in which careful attention must be given to the context here and in Malachi 1, where it was first spoken.

³ Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Edited and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. Second Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 408.

⁴ Sanday, William, and Arthur Headlam. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle To The Romans*. Fifth Edition. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark Ltd., 1980), p. 245.

13 καθώς γέγραπται, Τὸν Ἰακώβ ἠγάπησα, τὸν δὲ Ἡσαῦ ἐμίσησα.
 “Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

The introductory words to this quote of Malachi, *καθώς γέγραπται*, relate the quote not so much to the entire discussion so far. It is not yet another illustration of how God works in election, a third example of the principal. It is rather; a simple proof that what God predicted to Rebecca in Genesis 25:23 actually took place in real life history. It proves no more than this: that things really worked out between Jacob and Esau the way the Lord said they would. The International Critical Commentary agrees:

But it is really better to take the whole passage as corroborating the previous verse by an appeal to history. ‘God said the elder shall serve the younger, and, as the Prophet has shown, the whole of subsequent history has been an illustration of this.’⁵

This is important to keep in mind lest we find ourselves drifting toward the idea of double predestination once again. The Lord isn’t saying here that he elected Esau to be hated. Both love, *ἠγάπησα*, and hate, *ἐμίσησα*, are aorists. The verbs in this case are indicating something that took place in past time. But we are not now looking back to the time before these brothers were born. The Lord is speaking these words in Malachi hundreds of years after Jacob and Esau have lived and died. In the context there (Malachi 1:2-3), the Lord is speaking of his treatment of the brothers **in time**, and not of his choice beforehand. In answer to Israel’s question, “How have you loved us?” the Lord replies that even though the two were brothers, he showed love to Jacob. Esau’s land, on the other hand, was turned into a wasteland. The contrast is to reassure Israel that he has loved them. This does not provide a **reason** for such treatment, but simply demonstrates that **in time**, this is how he has treated “Jacob.” Not only does God **say** he chose Jacob. If one looks at history it becomes obvious that the Lord also acted on that choice in his treatment of Jacob.

Even as we understand that **this** quote is not a reference to election per se, but to God’s treatment of Esau and Jacob and their descendants in time, some are still bothered that God “hates” Esau. Siegbert Becker notes:

Commentators have wrestled with this and tried to get rid of the meaning of these words. They don’t like to have it stand that God hated Esau because they say that God doesn’t hate anybody. It is true that God doesn’t hate anybody when you’re preaching the gospel. But God hates everybody when you’re preaching the law.⁶

Besides keeping this proper distinction between law and gospel in mind, we must also remember that in Malachi we are not just dealing with the individuals Jacob and Esau. In Malachi the Lord is really looking at the nations which they founded. With this in mind Becker continues:

When God says, Jacob have I loved (9:13), this is a proclamation of the gospel. It doesn’t mean that God doesn’t love Esau. God wanted Esau in heaven, too. We don’t know if Esau was lost or not... The Edomites did not share in the blessings given to the Israelites (9:4,5). They remained under the law, you might say. As a result of living under the law, they joined all the people whom God hates. By their unbelief (apparent in their opposition to Israel—Numbers 20:14-21; 2 Samuel 8:14; 2 Chronicles 20:10-12, 22-24; 25:11,12,14,15) they cut themselves off from the love of God.⁷

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁶ Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The Lord treated the descendants of Esau as their actions in time deserved. The Lord treated the descendants of Jacob with love because of his gracious election.

So far Paul has been explaining election in a way that combatted a popular misunderstanding of the teaching among the people of Israel. The doctrine can also be derived from many other places in the Old Testament, as Paul himself will reveal in the upcoming verses. But the meaning of this doctrine had undergone some twisting. The International Critical Commentary explains:

That this idea of Divine Election was one of the most fundamental in the O.T. needs no illustration...But between the conception as held by St. Paul's contemporaries and the O.T. there were striking differences. In the O.T. it is always looked upon as an act of condescension and love of God for Israel,...But among the Rabbis the idea of election has lost all its higher side. It is looked on as a covenant by which God is bound and over which He seems to have no control. Israel and God are bound in an indissoluble marriage (Shemoth rabba 1.51): the holiness of Israel can never be done away with, even though all Israel sin, (sic) it still remains Israel (Sanhedrin 55) : the worst Israelite is not profane like the heathen (Bammidbar rabba 17): no Israelite can go into Gehenna (Pesikta 38a):⁸

Over against such a view which makes God the servant of election and not the master, which forces God to make a choice based upon the worldly circumstance, Paul has once again asserted the independence and grace of God in making his choice. God reveals election for my comfort, but it is not based upon who I am but upon who God is. In fact, while the Rabbis intended to bring themselves more comfort by finding the basis for God's election in themselves, such a view actually robs the teaching of all comfort. However; even in its pure form, the doctrine of election raises some difficult questions for sinful man. Having explained the teaching, Paul now defends it against the questions which inevitably arise.

14 Τι οὖν ἐροῦμεν; μὴ ἀδικία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ; μὴ γένοιτο.

“What shall we say then? There is injustice with God? By no means!”

The connective οὖν indicates that the coming question follows logically from what has just been said. When God appears to have no criteria in choosing those whom he chooses, is it not tempting to accuse him of injustice? If all men are the same before God, then how can a just God choose some and not others? Is this fair? Although Paul begins the question with μὴ to indicate that he expects the answer “no,” the accusation against God seems to make some sense humanly speaking. But Paul backs up his strong dismissal of the charge against God by reminding us that there is another principle involved in how the Lord acts.

15 τῷ Μωϋσεῖ γὰρ λέγει, Ἐλεῶσθε ὃν ἂν ἐλεῶ καὶ οἰκτιρήσω ὃν ἂν οἰκτίρω.

“For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’”

Paul connects this to his assertion in the previous verse with an explanatory γάρ. The context of Paul's next Scriptural explanation is in the words the Lord once spoke to Moses in Exodus 33:19. Following the golden calf incident, Moses was in need of reassurance from the Lord. Therefore, he asked to see God's glory. In reply the Lord agreed to have his goodness pass before Moses and to proclaim his name. It was in connection with this promise to proclaim his name that he states “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

⁸ Sunday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

The Lord's words about his mercy are more than a simple statement of fact. Both ἔλεῃσω and οἰκτιρήσω are in the future tense. That future tense expresses God's **intent**, his **will**, as much as it expresses future action. Reflecting the Hebrew imperfect, the future tense can be used to express a command (cf. the ten commandments). In this case, it at least makes it clear that God's active will is involved in what he claims to do. Once again, he acts independently in expressing his mercy. It relies on his good will, not the actions of those who receive it. This becomes doubly clear when we look at the objects in each sentence. The objects of "I will have mercy" and "I will have compassion" are the relative clauses introduced by the accusative ὃν. The object of his mercy is simply the one "on whom I have mercy." No reason is given other than that God has mercy on him. The same is true of his compassion.

We see here that the other principal Paul wants us to keep in mind in addition to God's justice is God's independent mercy. But what is God's mercy? The Hebrew word translated "have mercy" by Paul in Romans is חַסֵּד, a word we may be more likely to render "grace" in English. There is not a wide gap between God's grace and God's mercy in Greek thought. "Grace removes guilt, mercy removes misery."⁹ Mercy seems to imply a greater empathy with its object. Mercy feels someone else's pain and is then moved to help bear and alleviate that pain. Grace emphasizes the freedom, the love, the absolute charity behind the giving of the help. The Hebrew חַסֵּד melds the two to a certain degree.

The word which we have translated "compassion," οἰκτιρήσω, comes from the Hebrew חַסֵּד, which we are more accustomed to translate "mercy" when translating from Hebrew to English. It is interesting that in explaining what is involved with this term, the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* offers this observation:

There are several ideas attached to God's deep, tender love: first, the **unconditional election of God** (Exodus 33:19); {emphasis mine} next, his mercy and forgiveness toward his people in the face of deserved judgement...also, God's continuing mercy and grace in, preserving his unrepentant people from judgement (II Kings 13:23).¹⁰

Those who would accuse the Lord of injustice must remember, then, that justice is not God's only attribute. In addition, the Lord has this deeply heart-felt, freely given love and concern for and empathy with his human creatures that he dispenses as he sees fit. This leads Paul to conclude...

16 ἄρα οὖν οὐ τοῦ θέλοντος οὐδὲ τοῦ τρέχοντος ἀλλὰ τοῦ ἐλεῶντος θεοῦ.

"Consequently, then, it is not of wishing nor of effort, but of God's showing mercy."

With ἄρα and οὖν, Paul strongly expresses that God's word to Moses compels one to draw the conclusion which follows. Three present participles describe the three possible sources (genitive of source) by which God is moved to make his choice. God's choice does **not** come from wishing (τοῦ θέλοντος). Man's will, his own inner attitudes and desires and choices, do not influence the Lord to choose him.

Nor does God's choice come about as a result of man's own efforts. Literally, Paul says that it does not come from running, τοῦ τρέχοντος. This is the familiar picture of someone running a race, spending their efforts in order to obtain a prize (cf. I Cor. 9:24, of course). No human efforts, works, or sacrifices, no matter how heroic or noble, can entice God to elect us, either.

⁹ Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

¹⁰ Harris, R. Laird, ed., Gleason Archer and Bruce Waltke, Ass. Eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Volume II. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 842.

No, election is a matter of the gospel. It belongs to God's grace. It has its source in the mercy which he shows (τοῦ ἐλεῶντος θεοῦ).

It is this mercy of God that Paul offers as an answer to those who would accuse God of injustice. There is no intention of pitting God's mercy against God's justice, but when it comes to election, mercy is the guiding principle, not justice.

Does this make God unfair? Not at all. If the Lord were acting only according to his justice, then everyone would go to hell. Not a single human being deserves anything better. But...

If you want to talk about unfairness at all here, you might say that what is really extraordinary is that some people should go to heaven. If you insist that God be fair according to your idea of fairness, then you have to agree with this: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). If we all get what's coming to us, no one is going to be saved. But the remarkable thing is that some people are saved. Why are they saved? Because God is good to them. This is what Paul means when he says, "**So then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy**" (9:16).¹¹

Now Paul goes on with yet another Old Testament illustration. As was the case with the reference to Esau and Jacob in verse 13, one needs to be careful not to get entangled with double predestination in this reference to Pharaoh. Paul has answered the question "Is God fair?" by pointing to his mercy. Now he points out that God's justice is still operative as well, that he still acts justly, by bringing up his treatment of Pharaoh.

17 λέγει γὰρ ἡ γραφή τῷ Φαραῶ ὅτι Εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐξήγειρά σε ὅπως ἐνδείξωμαι ἐν σοὶ τὴν δύναμίν μου καὶ ὅπως διαγγελῆ τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐν πάσῃ τῇ γῆ.

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very thing I raised you, so that I might display my power in you, and so that my name might be proclaimed far and wide in all the earth.'"

Although not directly related to our topic, it is probably worth noting that Paul's phraseology supports verbal inspiration. God's own words to Pharaoh are introduced with, "Scripture says to Pharaoh," rather than "The Lord says to Pharaoh." The Bible never sees a difference between the words written in it and God's word.

The connective γὰρ indicates that Paul is still explaining that God is not unjust. This is evident from the way in which the Lord dealt with Pharaoh just prior to the seventh plague, the plague of hail. Following the sixth plague, the plague of boils, we are told for the first time, "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exodus 9:12). Then, in preparation for the seventh plague, the Lord sends Moses to Pharaoh with this message about the Lord's reason for raising Pharaoh to power. He says that it is for this very thing, εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο. The preposition εἰς has a telic sense. It presents a goal. The demonstrative τοῦτο and intensive αὐτὸ point ahead to what follows as the embodiment of that goal.

That goal is defined in the two purpose clauses following ὅπως. Having been raised to a position of fame himself, Pharaoh's stubborn attitude and eventual hardening by the Lord gave the Lord an opportunity to put his own power on display. Pharaoh himself was the instrument by which God showed this power (ἐν σοὶ). Pharaoh can't help serving God's purpose despite his hostility to the Lord. This is one act of judgement against him, one evidence of the Lord's justice. The other is that through all the punishments Pharaoh and Egypt must endure, "my name might be proclaimed far and wide in all the earth."

Is God acting justly in this case? Absolutely! Pharaoh had stubbornly defied God time and time again. The Lord had given him many chances. One might even say that the Lord had displayed a fair amount of

¹¹ Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

patience and mercy in tolerating Pharaoh's antics this long. The Lord ended up giving Pharaoh exactly what he had coming. The Formula of Concord says:

But that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, namely, that Pharaoh always sinned again and again, and became the more obdurate, the more he was admonished, that was a punishment of his antecedent sin and horrible tyranny, which in many and manifold ways he practised inhumanly and against the accusations of his heart toward the children of Israel.¹²

The notable difference between this case and the example of Moses listed just before is that now God is once again working on the basis of what man has done. We are not in the realm of gospel but of law. There is no mention here of any kind of election. There is no decree of God before time begins that binds Pharaoh over to this sort of behavior.

...we do not read that it does not depend on man's conduct or guilt but freely on God's wrath and displeasure. That would be an unscriptural thought and would oppose the whole context to which the quotation concerning Pharaoh is added. We know that God's demonstration of power in Pharaoh had its cause in his disobedience.¹³

Thus Paul can sum up...

18 ἄρα οὖν ὃν θέλει ἐλεεῖ, ὃν δὲ θέλει σκληρύνει.

"Therefore he has mercy on whom he wishes, and he hardens whom he wishes."

The exegesis of the first half of this verse has really been covered in our discussion of verse 15. Therefore we will not cover this all over again.

But the last half of the verse might seem to present a problem. Does this not say that God deals with those he hardens in the same way he deals with those to whom he shows mercy? Is this not saying that in each case the Lord simply deals as he wishes, according to his own will, without reference to the deeds of the people involved? In suggesting this we have already gone beyond the text. The words here simply say that there are those whom God wishes to harden, and he hardens them. This verse says nothing about reasons for doing so. Those reasons have been presented already in the preceding verse. It is because of man's own obduracy, as Pharaoh demonstrates. In looking at each half of this verse, we are really looking at two types of God's will, explained for us in the two examples which precede in verses 15-17.

We talk about the antecedent will of God and the consequent will of God. God wants to damn men because they have been wicked, as a consequence of their wickedness. So God wants to save men because they have been good? No—that would be consequent will, too. The will of God to save men is an antecedent will. When God wants to damn somebody, it is because of what he (the person) is. When God wants to save somebody it isn't because of what the person is, but because of what he (God) is.¹⁴

19 Ἐρεῖς μοι οὖν, τί [οὖν] ἔτι μέμφεται; τῷ γὰρ βουλήματι αὐτοῦ τίς ἀνθέστηκεν;

"You will say to me, then, 'Why, then, does he still find fault (with us)?' For who has set themselves against his will?"

¹² *Concordia Triglotta*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 1091.

¹³ Stoeckhardt, George. *Epistle to the Romans*. Translated by Erwin Koehlinger. (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1980), p. 126.

¹⁴ Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

The flesh is not satisfied with the answer Paul has given. The verb ἔρεῖς is a future tense. It gives a sense of inevitability to what follows. It is also second person singular. “You” could be anyone generally. No fleshly human being feels comfortable with the doctrine of election as it has been laid out. The questions which follow might have occurred to any one of us.

Together with the particle ἔτι, the present tense verb μέμφεται, stresses ongoing action in the question we all want to ask. “Why does God continue to find fault with me? Why am I to blame?” The flesh wants to lay the blame back on the Lord’s doorstep here. Since we can’t make God choose us, human reason feels it would be unfair if I had to take the blame for my unbelief while another who is equally as sinful receives God’s mercy and forgiveness. It is just this sort of thinking that gets us into a mess when we consider election, so that we see only the terror of sin and hear the rebellious rumblings of our flesh and lose the gospel comfort the doctrine intends to provide.

The follow up question states the real offense against our reason. “Who has set themselves against his will?” The verb ἀνθέστηκεν is perfect tense. While its voice is active in form, in the N.T. it has a middle meaning. It means to take a stand against someone or oppose them. Indeed, who can oppose God’s will? The word for will, βουλήματι, includes the idea of planning, which is fitting in discussion of election, where God’s plans in eternity are in view.

Once God has planned something, it must be followed. We have no power to resist his will if he wishes to use his will that way. Why, then, doesn’t he simply overcome all opposition with his will? None of us could resist if he did. No one has ever successfully broken with what God has decreed in the past (emphasis of perfect tense of ἀνθέστηκεν). Man recognizes the certainty of God’s election—that it must carry through to faith and salvation. “Why has God not elected everyone?” is the question.

20 ὦ ἄνθρωπε, μενοῦνγε σὺ τίς εἶ ὁ ἀνταποκρινόμενος τῷ θεῷ; μὴ ἐρεῖ τὸ πλάσμα τῷ πλάσαντι, Τί με ἐμοίησας οὕτως;

“O man, on the contrary, who are **you** who objects to God? Will craft work say to the one who crafted it, ‘Why did you make me this way?’”

Paul’s reply is to toss the objection out. We have no right to question God this way. The prefix ανταπο on the participle ἀνταποκρινόμενος expresses reciprocal action in the objection.¹⁵ In other words, one pictures some arguing back and forth here, like a little child talking back to his parent. The particle μενοῦνγε stresses that what Paul gives now is the correct answer, the correct way of looking at things in contrast to the incorrect. While I have translated it “on the contrary,” it is hard to catch the sense in English. One might choose to leave it untranslated. The reply itself shows that the original question was wrong-spirited.

Paul also emphasizes the impertinence of man’s objection to God with the pronoun σὺ. Grammatically, the word wouldn’t even have to be included in the sentence. The verb εἶ would take care of it. But not only does Paul include the pronoun, he places it way up front. “Just who do **you** think **you** are!?” is the sense we get.

Once again Paul resorts to an illustration to make his point clear. “Look at the relationship between a craftsman and his work.” The cognates τὸ πλάσμα and τῷ πλάσαντι could refer to any skilled trade, though pottery will be specifically mentioned in the next verse. With μὴ the apostle expects a “no” answer to his question. Would a craftsmen get back talk like this from what he has made? No way.

¹⁵ Rienecker, Fritz. *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Translated by Cleon Rogers. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p. 369.

In the illustration we find our objection to God rephrased. The blame is cast back at God not only for the way he treats man, but also for the way than he made him. “Why did you make me so, in this way, like this (οὕτως)?” Since a double predestination is not even under consideration here, the question does not mean to imply that God elected and created us for evil. No, we must go back to the question, “Who has set themselves against his will?” God has made us responsible, moral agents—given us a will of our own. God has created us in such a way that we may resist him. He chooses to use his will in such a way that he does not simply overpower the will of every human being, though he could. While our human will is apart of the way in which we have been “fearfully and wonderfully made,” now it becomes the occasion for a complaint against God. Should we complain to God because he was good enough to give us our own will? We may as well complain that he gave us hands, because they can injure; or that he gave us mouths, because they can curse; or that he gave us eyes, because they can lust. It’s not his fault his gifts are abused the way they are.

As Paul continues with this illustration in the following verse, we need to be careful not to push the illustration too far, and to keep the emphasis where it belongs—the relationship of creature to creator.

21 ἢ οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν ὁ κεραμεὺς τοῦ πηλοῦ ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ φυράματος ποιῆσαι ὃ μὲν εἰς τιμὴν
σκεῦος ὃ δὲ εἰς ἀτιμίαν;

“Or doesn’t the potter have the authority over the clay of his lump of clay to make one piece for honor and another piece for dishonor.”

The key word in this verse is ἐξουσίαν, “authority.” The root for the word originally referred to something which was free and unencumbered. There was nothing to prevent an action—no obstacle in the way. It is easy to see how it then takes on the meaning of a “right” or “authority” that someone has. Nothing stands in the way of the potter. He is free to do what he wants with his clay (τοῦ πηλου –objective genitive). He has that authority. The same is true of God. He is free to create man and deal with man as he sees fit: To the question, “Doesn’t he have the authority?” Paul indicates that he is fishing for a “yes” answer by using the negative οὐκ. It is in the last part of this illustration, “to make one piece for honor and another piece for dishonor,” that some again find predestination to damnation. However, the purposes of the potter’s productions (telic εἰς) are mentioned only to emphasize the freedom and authority with which the potter works. Naturally this must be expressed somehow. Thus we see he is free to make things any way he pleases. Sometimes he makes things in such a way that they will receive honor. Sometimes he makes things in such a way that they will seem very commonplace or utilitarian. **This is how we demonstrate that a potter has the authority to do as he pleases.** This does not mean that **God** makes people for honor or dishonor, that he elects them to be saved or elects them to be damned. Rather, it says that God can make people any way he wants. He has every, right to make them different from the rest of his creation, to give them a will, make them moral and responsible. But as with a parable, there is one tertium in the illustration, one main point of comparison. That point is that God is free and independent, like the potter, to do as he pleases. Just don’t push the illustration too far.

The next two verses we will consider together so that we can more easily make comparisons between the thoughts contained in each.

22 εἰ δὲ θέλων ὁ θεὸς ἐνδίξασθαι τὴν ὀργὴν καὶ γνωρίσαι τὸ δυνατόν αὐτοῦ ἤνεγκεν ἐν πολλῇ
μακροθυμίᾳ σκεύη ὀργῆς κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν, 23 καὶ ἵνα γνωρίσῃ τὸν πλοῦτον τῆς δόξης
αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ σκεύη ἐλέους ἃ προητοίμασεν εἰς δόξαν;

“What if God, although he was desiring to display his anger and to make known his power, put up with the vessels of his anger, which were fully qualified for destruction, with much

patience; and (what if he did this) so that he might make known the riches of his glory upon the vessels of his mercy, whom he prepared beforehand for glory?"

We have another sentence with no grammatical ending before us in verses 22-23. Literally, Paul begins with the protasis of a conditional sentence: "If God ...put up with the vessels..." The apodasis, which is implied, might be expressed something like this: "...then what would you conclude?" We can accomplish the same thing by beginning the whole sentence, "What if...?" which is the solution most translations use.

Both verses really hold up the mercy of God for consideration, although some translations would suggest that God's wrath and justice are more the focus in verse 22. In order to understand that verse, we must ask the question, "What is the force of the participial phrase, *θέλων...ἐνδείξασθαι τὴν ὀργήν*, 'wishing to show his anger'?" When translations use a simple English participle to express the Greek (KJV—willing, NIV—choosing, RSV—desiring, NET—wanting), the impression may well come across that the participle is causal. The Lord puts up with these vessels of anger **because** he wants to show his anger and make known his power. Then the idea is that being patient with them serves the cause of displaying his wrath. But how do those thoughts work together? I suppose one could say that, since the Lord doesn't simply wipe out or destroy those with whom he is angry in a sudden burst of wrath, this "patience" allows him to use them instead for displaying his anger and power later.

Is it not more natural, though, to understand the participle concessively? Although the Lord **wants** to show his anger, in his great patience and mercy he decides to endure those who anger him a while longer. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. The desire of God to show anger, and the forbearance he shows in his patience, are contrasting features of his will. We have a little presentation of law and gospel, not law and more law. In this way we see another example here of the great mercy of God.

God's mercy is even displayed in the vessels of his wrath, *σκεύη ὀργῆς*. The word *σκεύη* is the same word used for the work of the potter in the preceding verse. Now we see how God deals with the work of **his** hands. These are vessels which receive God's wrath, works with which God is angry. In fact, that is just what they deserve. Paul describes them as *κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν*, "fully qualified for destruction." This phrase is the last chance the supporter of double predestination has at winning his point. For example, the NIV translates the phrase "prepared for destruction." Depending upon whom you say did the preparing, that could suggest that God himself was responsible that they turned out this way. That is the way he made them. That was his choice for them before they existed—that they receive his wrath. But what does "*κατηρτισμένα*" really mean? The basic root of the word is *ἀρτίος*, which means "suitable" or "correct." The prefix *κατα* intensifies the meaning. The Louw & Nida *Greek-English Lexicon* defines the word, "cause to be fully qualified, completely qualified, fully adequate."¹⁶ But here we also have a perfect participle, which does not emphasize the **action** of the verb. Rather, "the perfect emphasizes state or condition."¹⁷ To this point Martin Franzmann adds:

(The translation "made for destruction" can be misleading. Paul does not here use the word which he used for "make" in vv. 20 and 21. The word which he uses means, rather, "finished," "fitted," "due," or "ripe," for destruction. Paul never uses this word for God's creative "making," although the author of the Letter of the Hebrews does, Heb. 11:3).¹⁸

We may also note that these vessels of wrath are described differently from the vessels of mercy in verse 23. There we have a different verb, and an active verb, of which God is clearly the subject. (*προητοιμάσεν*—"which

¹⁶ Louw, Johannes, and Eugene Nida, Eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Volume I, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), p. 680.

¹⁷ Rienecker, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ Franzmann, Martin. *Romans*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p.179.

he prepared in advance”). There can be no question that those vessels of mercy in verse 23 are such only because God made them such. This difference is a significant point that C.F.W. Walther picked up on during the election controversy in the old Synodical Conference:

It would be blasphemy to say “before” and “by God” in connection with the vessels of wrath, implying the Holy Spirit had erred by not offering clarification in this diverse manner of speech. He, who is eternal wisdom, was perfectly aware why, in one case, He said “by God” and, in another case, He did not;¹⁹

In conclusion, the Formula of Concord states:

Here, then, the apostle clearly says that God **endured** with long suffering the vessels of wrath, but does not say that He **made** them vessels of wrath; for if this had been His will, He would not have required any great longsuffering for it. The fault, however, that they are fitted for destruction belongs to the devil and to men themselves, and not to God.²⁰

Despite the fact that these vessels of anger **deserve** to be punished, and that God even **wants** to punish them, the Lord puts up with them in his patience. What grace!

There is also a purpose to God’s forbearance. Verse 23 begins with a ἵνα purpose clause. God bears the vessels of wrath patiently because he wants to make something known (γνωρίσῃ—aorist active subjunctive), namely, the riches of his glory. The word glory (τῆς δόξης) can mean “radiance or splendor” in Greek, especially in its Biblical usage when referring to God’s appearance or being. However, coming from the verb “δοκέω” “to believe or think,” the word can also mean “opinion,” or even “reputation,” just as the Hebrew word for glory, “כְּבוֹד,” often refers to the Lord’s reputation as Savior. While the Lord has worked out our salvation so that someday we will know the radiance and splendor of his being, he is already involved in making known his saving reputation, the gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, to ourselves and all the world. This is something he makes known to us every time we hear the gospel, everytime we hear that he has graciously elected us to be his own.

But how does putting up with the vessels of his anger serve the purpose of making his glory, his saving reputation, known? One might say that believers get to see God’s mercy at work just in the fact that he bears with the unbelieving. Some commentators feel that “vessels of his anger” refers especially to the unbelieving Jews, (this makes sense, because the aorist ἤνεγκεν, “put up with,” refers to past time). Therefore their rejection of the Gospel means that the gospel goes out to the ends of the world, so that the Gentiles see God’s glory. (Franzmann, Stoekhardt?) But doesn’t the purpose clause tell us the purpose of God being patient with them, not the purpose of their rejecting the gospel and thus becoming vessels of wrath? Other commentators (Sanday/Headlam, Lenski) suggest that God’s mercy is revealed by patience with the unbelieving Jews because he could have simply wiped them out as a nation in the past. That would have meant the end of the plan of salvation. By putting up with the Jews until Christ came, the world is saved and God’s glory is made known. Luther suggests that in putting up with the reprobate, God is allowing them to rule over and persecute the elect. Through such suffering the elect are led to see their own weakness, realize man’s condemnation, and despair of their own power to save themselves. Thus they are prepared to hear God’s grace.²¹

¹⁹ Walther, C.F.W. “Predestination”, paper delivered to 21st Western District Convention, Altenberg, Mo., May 24, 1877, in *Essays for the Church*. Volume II. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), p. 140.

²⁰ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1089.

²¹ Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Romans*. Translated by J. Theodore Mueller. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1954), p. 143.

But while the fullness of God's glory is being revealed to the vessels of his mercy (σκεύη ἐλέους), all the views given above assume that the "vessels of anger" and the "vessels of mercy" are two different groups. What if they were the same people? Our understanding of Law and Gospel doesn't rule out the idea of God being angry at and having mercy upon the same people. Is that not always the case? Does "vessels of anger, fully qualified for destruction" have to mean that these people were ultimately damned? Might not God put up with those with whom he is angry, people who are fully qualified to go to hell, with great patience, just so that he could show his great glory and the saving gospel to them, so that they might become "vessels of mercy," and receive eternal life? Since the Bible does not teach a double predestination here or anywhere, it is not out of keeping with our understanding of the vessels of anger to propose that they may also become the vessels of God's mercy: sinners who deserved to go to hell, but whom God elected, called, and saved as the benefactors of his mercy.

However you choose to understand the working out of the purpose of God's patience in this matter, we can clearly say that God is acting for the benefit of his elect, people whom God prepared ahead of time for glory, ἡ προητοίμασεν εἰς δόξαν. As said earlier, this election is clearly the work of God for us. He is the subject of the verb in this phrase. This also clearly took place in time past. The prefix *προ* on the verb means that God did not simply "prepare" those to whom he shows mercy, but that he prepared them beforehand, ahead of time, for the glory they receive. Paul describes this work of God more fully in the previous chapter, Romans 8:29-30:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son; that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.

In view of the patience and mercy of God described here, who can complain? Who still wants to object to what God does? God's gracious election is not a basis for accusation of God. Paul has taken the teeth out of the argument of those who accuse God of being unjust. Do they really want an unmerciful God?

Finally, just who are these "vessels of mercy?"

24 οὓς καὶ ἐκάλεσεν ἡμᾶς οὐ μόνον ἐξ Ἰουδαίων ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐξ ἐθνῶν,
 "Us whom he also called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles,..."

With this last verse, we see that **we** are the ones whom God has chosen. **We** are the ones who receive his mercy. That is why election is a comfort. It is fitting that we end our study here, for in this verse we see one last gospel gem to help us understand that election is in fact a preaching of the gospel. Who are those whom God has elected, prepared in advance, and shown mercy? They are those whom he has called—called to faith. Lest we plague ourselves with questions about whether or not we are among the elect, Paul gives us the only way God indicates our election. He calls us to faith.

Franz Pieper once said of the doctrine of election:

It has therefore been well said that in the doctrine of election a theologian takes his final examination. This Scripture doctrine sweeps the last remnants of Pelagianism and rationalism out of one's theology.²²

Does this mean that this is my last conference paper? Probably not. It does mean that this a doctrine which lets God be God. We cannot possibly fathom how he makes his choice and simply must leave that to him. It also lets God be gracious. Even before time began, he took the responsibility for everything in our salvation upon himself, leaving us with no reason to doubt that we are saved. This is God's Gracious Choice.

²² Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. Volume III. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 503