

"GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE HUMAN RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL"

(Romans 9:1-33)

(Frank Theilman)

For Paul the problem was not whether to proclaim the gospel to the Jews. The gospel was for the Jew first (1:16). Instead, it was how to account for Jewish rejection of the gospel. How could one be a Jew, with all the privileges Paul lists in 9:4-5, and yet fail to receive the climactic resolution of those gifts in the gospel? It is significant that in answering this question Paul does not, in the first instance, blame those Jews who have rejected the gospel. He will do that later (9:30-10:21). Rather, he begins by entertaining the question of whether the fault could lie with God. God promised the Jews that they would be his people, but now because they have rejected the gospel, unbelieving Jews are only his people in a provisional sense. Given his promises, how could God have arranged things so that so many Jews did not believe in him? Behind this question lies the assumption that God decides who will believe the gospel and decides this down to the level of the relative numbers of individuals in each people group who will do so (9:12,14-18). The problem Paul addresses is how God can be faithful to Israel and choose such a small number of Israelites to belong to the inner circle of his people.

For centuries students of Scripture have found this teaching to be particularly difficult, and it is easy to see why. First, this idea seems to remove all human responsibility for proclaiming or believing the gospel. What is the point of human involvement in the gospel with respect either to communicating it or accepting it if God has determined in advance which individuals belong to his people?

Second, one can describe the idea that God decides who will believe the gospel in a way that makes God not only responsible for the salvation of human beings but also for evil since he seemingly creates certain human beings in order that they might sin and that he might then destroy them for his glory. A variation on this idea depicts God as within his rights even to destroy innocent human beings, if any had existed, simply because he created them. One follower of Augustine in antiquity put it this way: "If the human race, which exists as originally created out of nothing, had not been born under the guilt of death and with original sin, and the omnipotent Creator had wanted to condemn some to eternal perdition, who could say to the omnipotent Creator, 'Why have you done this?'" This is the sort of thinking that George MacDonald probably had in mind when he said, "Of all evils, to misinterpret what God does, and then say the thing as interpreted must be right because God does it, is of the devil."

To read Romans 9:7-23 in these ways, however, is to read the passage in a one-sided way, without the balance provided by the context. As Paul will say in 9:30-10:21 and as his own missionary efforts imply (1:5, 13; 15:14-21; 16:25-26), Christians were called to preach the gospel, and those who heard the gospel were responsible for responding to it with obedience (1:5; 16:26). Although those who believe the gospel do so because God predestined, called, justified, and glorified them (8:30), God uses those who proclaim the gospel and the spiritually transformed hearts of those who hear the gospel as the means by which he "shows mercy to whom he wills" (9:18; cf., e.g., Acts 2:39; 13:48; 18:9-10; Eph 1:3-14; 2:5-10). Scripture does not clarify how the human responsibility to believe and proclaim the gospel coheres logically with God's initiative and freedom in showing mercy to whom he will. The logical web that binds together these two sides of redemption may be beyond human understanding, but it is reasonably clear that Scripture affirms both.

The idea that this passage teaches God created people in order to destroy them, moreover, attributes conduct to God that God himself finds sinful in human beings. It depicts God as forcing people to sin and then condemning them for it or, worse, condemning the innocent. The idea that God is unrighteous but, thankfully, is on the side of the church cannot be the gospel.

Again, however, this is not the picture of God that Paul paints in Romans 9:7-23. Paul certainly depicts God as sovereignly raising up Pharaoh and hardening him for the purpose of showing his power and proclaiming his name in the whole earth (9:17). He also illustrates God's



sovereignty over salvation by picturing God as a potter making some vessels for honor followed by glory and others for dishonor followed by destruction (9:20-21). But he tempers the entire concept with the notion that God endured the vessels of wrath that he made with much patience and by speaking of the fitting out of these vessels in the passive voice (9:22). By doing this, he indicates that one must not misread the illustrations to make God the author of evil and sin.

Although Paul is not explicit, it is likely that he understood God's actions of raising up Pharaoh, hardening him, and shaping vessels for dishonor and destruction as God's judgment on already sinful human beings. This presupposition would be consistent at least with the interplay between God's hardening of Pharaoh and Pharaoh's hardening of himself in Exodus 4-14. It would also be consistent with Paul's conviction, expressed unambiguously in 5:12-19, that all human beings since Adam's disobedience have themselves been disobedient to God and deserving of his condemnation. Paul's illustration of the potter in 9:19-23, then, is not about God predestining certain people to sin, nor is it about the relationship between the entry of sin into God's creation and God's predestining will. It is instead about God's response to already sinful human beings.

This does not mean that human sin took God by surprise and was somehow outside the scope of God's original design for the universe. It simply means that the answer to such questions lies beyond human understanding. Herman Bavinck, reflecting on the biblical doctrine of reprobation fairly represents the theological implications of this passage (although he is not speaking specifically about Rom 9:19-23),

Sin and its punishment can never as such, and for their own sake, have been willed by God. They are contrary to his nature. He is far removed from wickedness and does not willingly afflict anyone. When he does it, it is not because, deep down, he wants to. They can therefore have been willed by God only as a means to a different, better, and greater good. . . . Sin is not itself a good. It only becomes a good inasmuch as, contrary to its own nature, it is compelled by God's omnipotence to advance his honor. It is a good indirectly because, being subdued, constrained, and overcome, it brings out God's greatness, power, and justice.¹

Ultimately, then, we must hold God's sovereignty over the response of human beings to the gospel and to their inclusion or exclusion from his people in tension with the insistence of the Scriptures that God's people are responsible for proclaiming the gospel and that those who hear the gospel proclaimed are responsible for believing it.

J. I. Packer, in a wise treatment of the subject, urged Christians to accept the inconsistency that seems to be involved in this antinomy as only apparent and as reflective of a deficiency in human understanding rather than in God's word. Christians, he argued, should "be careful. . . not to set" God's sovereignty and human responsibility "at loggerheads, nor to make deductions from either that would cut across the other," but to "use each within the limits of its own sphere of reference."²

In practical terms, this means that believers should be active in evangelism, presenting the gospel in winsome ways through word and deed and recognizing that God is not willing "that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). At the same time their evangelistic efforts should be free from any hint of manipulation, coercion, or impatience, and they should not bear the burden of thinking that their own mistakes and failures have prevented someone from believing the gospel. God is sovereign and merciful, and so nothing can separate from his love those whom he has called to be his people (8:30, 38-39).

These practical observations are helpful for understanding how Christians should approach explaining the gospel to Jewish friends. Whereas Christians need to remember that the gospel is for the Jew first, they also need to remember that God is sovereign over the response of Jewish people to the gospel. An impatient approach in evangelism to Jewish people that fails to recognize the complex history of Jewish-Christian interaction and the many barriers that history has constructed between Christians and Jews is likely only to erect further barriers and create greater misunderstanding. Because God is sovereign over evangelism, Christians can take comfort that the patience necessary for listening to, learning from, and becoming genuine friends with their Jewish neighbors is not jeopardizing their possible salvation but following the most loving and prudent path.

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: vol. 2, God and Creation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 398.

² J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), p. 21.