

Predestination and Free Will in Romans 9 – 11

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Romans 9 – 11 is sometimes taken as a statement of how God elects particular individuals to eternal life and others to eternal damnation. Quite a few people have read the sweep of Romans 1 – 11 and felt nervous, for it raises questions about the very character of God. While it's true that those who have faith in Jesus are freed from condemnation and blessed beyond measure (4:1 – 8:39), if that only applies to those whom God predestined for salvation, and if it is not at all true for non-Christians whom God has apparently predestined for hell, then what can be said about the character of God? Put simply, is the goodness of God revealed in Romans 4 – 8 the true character of God? Or is the arbitrariness of God ostensibly discussed in Romans 9 – 11 His true character, His larger character, of which His goodness towards some is only a part? How can both of these sections stand side by side?

Thankfully, however, there are serious textual objections to this interpretation of Romans 9 – 11. The major connection occurs around the term 'hardening' in 9:18 and 11:25. In the first instance, God 'hardened' Pharaoh's heart to demonstrate His power to bring Israel out of the Gentiles. In the second instance, God 'hardened' Israel to demonstrate His power to bring the Gentiles into Israel. In the first case, God blessed Israel. In the second case, God blessed the Gentiles. Thus, a basic symmetry is reflected. God did this in order to advance His purposes to save and bless more people. In the first case, that purpose was to trigger faith among the Israelites and gather them as a community. In the second case, that purpose was to trigger faith among the Gentiles and gather them into the community. In both cases, the hardening was *temporary* and achieved a greater purpose in terms of saving more and more people. This symmetry is basic to the thought of Romans 9 – 11. And it undergirded a very personal and practical issue for Paul: his desire to see more Israelites express faith in Jesus. If Paul believed that God's hardening of Israel was permanent, he would logically turn away from the Jews. But this is precisely the opposite of what he did. He yearned deeply for more Jews to embrace Jesus as Messiah (9:1 – 5), and his whole strategy for winning more Jews was to arouse their 'jealousy' that Gentiles were turning to God through Christ and experiencing God's blessing (11:13 – 14), and that because of the mercy shown to the Gentiles, they might also turn to Christ and be shown mercy (11:31).

Paul first establishes God's freedom of choice *to accomplish His historical purposes*. After he introduces his passion for all Israel (9:1 – 5), Paul says God freely chose Isaac over Ishmael and then Jacob over Esau (9:6 – 13). Paul is merely highlighting God's choice to take not all of Abraham's natural descendants into the early covenant community, a point that will be relevant in defending why God can choose to take not all of Abraham's natural descendants (i.e. of ethnic Israel) during Paul's day. The choice exercised here by God is not necessarily a choice to salvation in Christ. As evidence of this, Paul mentions Esau in 9:11 – 13, particularly in the quotation from Malachi ('Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'). Paul is not saying that Esau was damned. Esau, by all account in Genesis, had a change of heart in relation to God and Jacob as demonstrated by his reconciliation with Jacob (Gen.33:4, 11).¹ So this introductory section is not about who has faith and who does not, or who is saved and who is not. It merely highlights God's freedom of choice at particular points in time relative to the covenant community.

Incidentally, within the sweep of the Old Testament narration, clearly some outside the lineage of Abraham were 'saved' by faith without becoming part of the pre-messianic covenant community. Esau is just one example. Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5) is surely another. Now that the Messiah has come and is gathering the one covenant community under his rule and transforming them into God's new humanity, however, all who hear of Jesus are called to join him. In response to the question of how God might save people 'who have never heard of Jesus': For a few Gentile people who have never heard the gospel, but have some sort of 'faith' that God recognizes, they may be essentially living an Old Testament existence as Gentiles separate from Israel. God probably saves them through Jesus in the same way He saved Naaman the Syrian, etc. I would hasten to add, though, that I think there are very few people who would fall into this category. The important thing is that when they are informed of the gospel, they are given much clearer information. And they must enter into Jesus' community of both Jewish and Gentile Christians for salvation.

Paul then uses the 'pottery and clay' analogy in 9:14 – 29. This does not mean, as some believe, that God made some people only to knowingly consign them to hell. Nor does it mean that people lack the ability to choose. Careful attention must be paid to how Paul is using this analogy. Paul's burden in Romans 9 – 11 is to explain the *current* state of history and Christian mission, not the *permanent* principles behind the divine will. In other words, Paul explains why the Messianic community now consists of both Gentiles and Jews, while all Israel has meanwhile

¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford University Press; London, 1933), p.345- 61. Cited and affirmed by Donald Bloesch, *God the Almighty* (InterVarsity Press; Downers' Grove, IL, 1995), p.142.

not believed in Jesus, and what he is therefore doing about it. Thus, when we read the ‘potter and clay’ passage, we must read it in this context.

This clears several things up for us. First, it makes sense why Paul says that the people who were ‘called’ are ‘from among the Gentiles’ (9:24, supported by the quote from Hosea in 9:25 – 26), and a ‘remnant’ from Israel (9:27, quoted from Isaiah in 9:27 – 29). In other words, the community of the Jewish Messiah is open to all peoples, Jew and Gentile, and the mission to ethnic Israel is still live and ongoing. Romans 11 does not give any sense that a Christian mission to the Jews should be abandoned in favor of a theology that says that ethnic Jews will just be saved by God mysteriously as part of an ‘end-times’ scenario, as some Protestants and Catholics believe, especially with the establishment of the political State of Israel in 1948. When Paul says ‘and thus all Israel will be saved,’ he is referring to this goal as the result of the evangelistic activity of Jewish and Gentile Christians. ‘All Israel’ refers, not to a mad rush of the very last generation of Israelites before Christ’s second coming, but to the gradual inflow of Jewish Christians in response to the church’s evangelistic mission over time, the true Israel.

Second, the analogy of ‘potter and clay’² should not be pushed beyond how Paul uses it. Paul’s analogy does not mean that God makes all the choices and human beings make none. We clearly do make choices, since Paul attributes decisions to both Gentiles and Jews immediately afterwards: Gentiles ‘attained the righteousness which is by faith’ and Israel ‘stumbled over the stumbling stone’ (9:30 – 33). So we are not clay in the sense that we have no *will*; we are clay in the sense that we have no *rights* to lay a claim on God *against using Pharaoh and Israel in history*. The temporary ‘hardening’ is what Paul has in mind.³ God’s sealing of an already existing predisposition and an already existing course of action that has been initiated. Paul is merely establishing that God had a right to work through certain people in a certain way through this ‘hardening,’ which was temporary, limited, and for the specific historical purpose of saving others.

Third, for that reason, Paul is establishing that both Pharaoh and Israel have no right to complain or ‘talk back’ to God for the way they were treated or are being treated. For in both cases, God merely sealed a decision that they had already made internally. For instance, Pharaoh was not predisposed to let Israel go; he hardened his own heart before the text of Exodus tells us that God hardened his heart (Ex.5:1 – 9, 7:13 – 14). Apparently, God released His own hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, but Pharaoh pursued his own course of action. This led to disaster at the Red Sea for the Egyptians. Similarly, ethnic Israel at the time of Jesus was not predisposed towards Jesus; the Pharisees’ hearts were hardened (Mk.3:5) and so were the disciples’ (Mk.6:52). However, just as Pharaoh and the Egyptians had a choice about letting the Jews exit Egypt, ethnic Israel also has a chance to repent and believe in Jesus. Ethnic Israelites at the time of Paul’s ministry and writing were certainly able to believe in Jesus as their Messiah: The ‘partial hardening’ (11:25) was temporary for the purpose of Israel crucifying Jesus; it was not so permanent that Paul should give up on his countrymen for all time. To the contrary, he still evangelized the Jews, which meant that he recognized that the ‘hardening’ was not permanent (10:1, 10:14 – 15, 11:14). Paul knew that some Israelites would still choose a righteousness of their own based on the Mosaic Law, rather than pursue faith in Jesus as the ‘climax’ or ‘end’ (‘telos’) of the Law (10:4). But some Israelites would in fact choose Jesus. It is this distinction between believing Israel from ethnic Israel that Paul consistently calls the ‘remnant,’ which is the product of the mysterious interaction between human choices and God’s choice (as He chose between Isaac and Abraham’s other descendants, or between Jacob and Esau in Rom.9:6 – 13).

Furthermore, we are not at liberty to extend Paul’s insight into all situations and other people. God has only ‘hardened’ Pharaoh and, in a partial way, Israel. The rest of history remains mysterious. What we can say for now is that this section of Romans *might* suggest – though it does not at all explain – the interaction between our

² Paul may have drawn this image from Jeremiah’s use of the potter-clay analogy (Jer.18) which is probably drawn from the formation of Adam from clay-earth (Gen.2). Jeremiah used it to speak of God refashioning Israel in the new covenant.

³ Interestingly enough, Jewish and later Christian writers of impressive intellectual stature used this metaphor of clay to explain human free will. Maximus the Confessor said, ‘God is the sun of justice, as it is written, who shines rays of goodness on simply everyone. The soul develops according to its free will into either wax because of its love for God or into mud because of its love for matter. Thus just as by nature the mud is dried out by the sun and the wax is automatically softened, so also every soul which loves matter and the world and has fixed its mind far from God is hardened as mud according to its free will and by itself advances to its perdition, as did Pharaoh. However, every soul which loves God is softened as wax, and receiving divine impressions and characters it becomes the dwelling place of God in the Spirit.’ (*Maximus Confessor, Selected Writings*, Chapters on Knowledge, paragraph 12, Paulist Press, 1985, p.130). The double image of wax and mud and the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (Ex.7:13) are taken from Origen (*Princ.*3, 1, 11) who gets them from Philo (*Quis rer.div.her.*181:3, 41). This usage in Philo, Origen, and Maximus does not prove that Paul himself intended that meaning in Romans, or that he would necessarily have applied/extended the clay-potter analogy in the same way. However, the use of the double metaphor of wax and mud does attest to strong traditions of Jewish and early Christian belief in human free will, not divine determinism, regarding salvation, which corroborates my interpretation of Paul here.

choices and God's choices *in general*, as well as the fact that our choices are somehow taken up and used by God for His larger purposes. One must, however, end on Paul's note of hope: Paul believes that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, a new dynamic is present. A mutually reinforcing 'jealousy' drives Jews and Gentiles towards Jesus, because each wants what the other has. Evangelism, therefore, is multiplicative beyond the mere activity of the Christian. One person's reception of Christ triggers a jealousy in others for an experience of God's mercy as well: 'That He might show mercy to all' (Rom.11:32).⁴

The implications of this understanding of Romans 9 – 11 on the language of 'election' and 'predestination' are as follows:

- God's election and predestination of believers thoroughly preserves human autonomy and will, for both believers and non-believers alike.
- The whole purpose of being God's chosen, elect, and predestined people is so that others will be blessed by them and invited into becoming part of God's people. Election and predestination occur for the sake of gathering more into the people of God! It is a doctrine about the historical unfolding of Christian mission! Election and predestination are not terms to be used for the sake of expressing an arbitrary eternal choice God makes.
- In fact, God has destined all people, not just some people, to be conformed to the image of Christ (which Paul firmly asserts for believers in Rom.8:28 – 30; but notice his language of 'all things' in Rom.11:36; Eph.1:9 – 10; Col.1:20). Some people, however, reject this destiny, and reject the healing of their human nature which Jesus provides. Why? I believe the ball is firmly in the court of the human beings who reject Jesus. They have no rational answer, precisely because sin is irrational. Their rejection is simply based on their mistaken self-perception that they don't need Jesus to heal their human nature, and simultaneously their desire for things other than him.
- The larger historical unfolding of election is a temporal narrowing for the sake of wider ultimate blessing. First, God chose Abraham. Then God chose Isaac over Ishmael, then Jacob over Esau, then Judah over the other eleven tribes. Then out of all of the houses of Judah, God chose David and his house. The field keeps narrowing. Then, out of all the descendants of David, God chose Jesus, the Elect One. But Jesus is the Elect One for the sake of gathering all others into him by the Spirit, to therefore become elect ones, for the purpose of gathering others into Christ as well.

In this interpretation of Romans 9 – 11, which it must be agreed has much stronger exegetical support, which also has support from scholars from the fields of systematic theology (e.g. Karl Barth, David Bloesch) and biblical studies and exegesis (e.g. N.T. Wright), Romans 4 – 8 does *not* describe a *subset* of God's character. It is not the case that the goodness of God towards some is only half of the character of God. Instead, there is a straight line of continuity revealed about the incredibly good character of God from Romans 1 – 8 and on into Romans 9 – 11, as well as other Scriptures: He has not 'hardened' unbelievers such that He prohibits them from receiving Jesus. Whatever barriers exist only exist in the disposition of the unbelievers themselves, just as Jewish unbelievers chose to pursue their own righteousness based on the Sinaitic law (Rom.9:30ff.), a disposition rooted in ethnocentrism, self-centeredness, stubborn pride, and a desire for revenge that they refuse to give up. God desires for all to be saved in and through Jesus Christ (Ezk.18:23 – 33, Mt.23:37, Lk.13:34, 1 Tim.2:4, 2 Pet.3:9), and, while that is challenging to everyone in many ways because of what He calls us to give up, God has done nothing to inhibit it, and everything to accomplish it. That is indeed who God is.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Fortress Press; Minneapolis, MN, 1991), p.231 – 257.