God’s sovereignty in salvation

*Romans 9:1-29*

“It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” (9:16)

Up to chapter 8, Paul has devoted to the way of salvation by faith in Jesus. Chapter 8 is the concluding part of this doctrine. Verse 1 declares, **“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Talking about the sanctifying work of the Spirit, a**t the end, he concludes with overwhelming joy, **“For I am convinced that neither death nor life…nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:38-39).”** I believe this is also our confidence and joy. How could he reach this confidence? In verses 28-30, he reveals a glimpse of a doctrine of God’s sovereign predestination for salvation; this is the beginning and the fundamental foundation of our confidence. **”And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”** In Chapter 9 Paul explains this amazing truth of God’s sovereignty. That’s not hard to understand what he says here. But many are probably uncomfortable with it and find it hard joyfully to submit to. This chapter teaches who God is and how God works, but when we know this truth, we will be truly joyful and thankful.

1. God’s sovereign election (1-13)

We are very joyful to hear our salvation is eternally secure when we believe in Jesus. Then some may wonder, what about the Jews who are chosen but do not believe in Jesus? Paul admits Israel’s unbelief. That’s why he has great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart. He is even willing to be cursed and separated from Christ if it could bring salvation to the people of Israel, his own race. In his anguish, he reviews how uniquely God privileged Israel and put them at special position among the nations in his sovereign plan. Look at verses 4-5. **“…Theirs is the adoption to sonship; 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 the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”** The first privilege is the adoption to sonship. God chose Abram from the idolatrous city Ur of Chaldeans and promised to make him into a great nation. This is the beginning of Israel. Then later God declared that Israel is my firstborn son (Ex 4:22). This means God chose Israel for salvation and for eternal fellowship as father and son. On top of it, God demonstrated his divine glory by dwelling in them. God formally established covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David for the blessings of nation Israel, and also the new covenant concerning the Messiah. God gave them Mosaic law to establish a decent country in the lawless world. They were able to worship God in the temple, receiving forgiveness of sins and having fellowship with Him. In the OT, how many promises were given to them? These are the informal prophecies about the Messiah, permanently possessing the promised land, and restoration of Jerusalem. And history proves how faithfully God fulfilled his promises including the restoration of Israel in 1948 after 1800-year exile and the Holocaust, which is unique to Israel. They have great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the 12 sons of Jacob. They were the foundation of Israel and left footsteps of faith. Israel enjoyed these privileges and were very proud of being chosen people. But most importantly, all these privileges were to send God Incarnate in the Jewish lineage to be the Messiah for Jews and Gentiles together. They were to be the kingdom of priests and a holy nation toward the whole world. However, the Jews rejected Jesus and crucified him; thus, the adoption to sonship seems to be nullified so that God’s word has failed. Is it true?

How does Paul answer? Look at verses 6-7a. **“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children...”** What a shocking comment it is! God has not failed in working out his divine purposes. Rather, people did not understand the truth. God’s word was not intended for all who boasted of racial descent from Abraham, but spiritual children of Abraham. In fact, God chose Isaac rather than his older brother Ishmael although Abraham wanted him to be his heir. Paul cites God’s word to Hagar, Ishmael’s mother, **“…but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring (8b).”** Although they two were Abraham’s physical sons, Isaac was born of God’s promise, and Ishmael was born of flesh. Of cource, Abraham loved both of them so much and God blessed Ishmael also to be the ancestor of Arabic nation. But Isaac was regarded as Abraham’s offspring. What does it imply? God does not choose based on the physical qualification but on his sovereign will. Therefore, not all Jews are God’s children, but those who believe in Jesus Christ, the promise of God, are the true Israel.

Paul gives another illustration with the more complicated example: Jacob and Esau. Let’s read verses 10-13. **“Not only that, but Rebekah’s children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac.  Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”  Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”** Unlike Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau were twin brothers, wombmates, from the same mother Rebekah. God chose Jacob over Esau not after birth, but even before their birth, even before they had done anything good or bad. The phrase, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” from Malachi 1:2-3, might mean that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau as individuals, not like nations Israel and Edom. This is that God’s purpose according to his choice might stand or continue, not because of any contribution from human side but because of him who calls. God has all rights for he is all in all. God is absolutely sovereign over his creation. So he can choose some people to be saved according to his sovereign will. This is election. Our Lord Jesus confirmed that God elects his loved ones in many places. For just an example, *“And he will send his angels and gather his* ***elect*** *from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens (Mk 13:27).”* Only God determines salvation through his sovereign election.  Then what truth can we find from the election of God?

First, election is unconditional. God chose Jacob over Esau while they were still in Rebekah’s womb. They had no chance to do anything good or bad. This figuratively teaches that the election of God is not based on the works of individual, but on the will of God. Some may wonder whether God chose Jacob for he already knew that he would come to faith and rejected Esau for he would not. Spurgeon explained like this. Suppose there are twenty beggars on the street, and you decide to give out a dollar to one of them. You would not give the dollar to the person because you foresaw he would receive the dollar. You would just give money to the person because you want to. Their future life was not the basis of God’s choice, nor did God choose Jacob because of his foreknowledge. It is God’s unconditional gift. No one is chosen because they are good. God does not count our physical heritage, our works and merits as contribution to his choice even if we will become holy saints like Francesco or mother Theresa. His message is very clear no one can make God obligated as if he were indebted. We cannot buy our salvation by any means like indulgence that triggered reformation; this could include Jewish religious rituals and our church services. If we have to earn our election, how feeble our salvation would be! Our election is not guaranteed because there are always possibilities to slip down and fall away and lose it. But when we know this, we will become humble and thankful.

Second, election is eternal. When did God choose his elects? God chose Jacob yet he was unborn. Ephesians 1:4-5 say, *“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love hepredestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”* God laid down his divine plan with a clear purpose even before time began, when nothing existed but God alone in perfect silence. In eternity he predestined us to adopt into his heavenly family and in his joy and love he called us and justified us through our Lord Jesus Christ. So in Romans 8:35-39, Paul said that we are more than conquers. Nothing can separate us from the love of God: trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword. Anything that is Satan or demons or any powerful human being or any law enforcement cannot influence or thwart God’s purpose of election or bend his work of love. Instead, God uses all such things to fulfill His far greater plan from eternity to eternity. He never makes mistakes or changes his mind. Therefore, our election is eternal and God’s word never fails to secure our salvation so that we will see God face to face and enjoy his glory eternally. How amazing and awesome it is! Thank God.

Third, election is individual. The examples of Isaac and Jacob excludes tribal election. “…**not all who are descended from Israel are Israel (6b).”** Thistells that God did not choose nation Israel as a whole for salvation. Rather, God chose Isaac and Jacob as individuals. Thus God’s selection is very personal. Marriage cannot affect, upbringing in Christian family doesn’t make it automatic, being a member of a denomination or an organization does not help, either. Every individual must be personally chosen in Christ Jesus for eternal salvation.

Fourth, election is based on God’s mercy, not justice. Choosing one but not choosing others may make some people wonder and unhappy. They ask, “Is God unjust?” Paul’s answer is “Not at all.” What’s their wrong assumption in their question? They are arguing about God’s justice if God is unrighteous. Let’s read verses 15 and 16. **“For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.”** Verse 15 is citation from Exodus 33:19. When Moses went up the mountain for 40 days and nights to receive the Ten Commandments, people made a golden calf, then God’s wrath killed 3000 people among a million people. Although they all deserved to be condemned according to God’s justice, God showed his mercy and compassion to the rest. Who can say I am exempt? Who can say I am good enough to escape God’s judgment? They are as ridiculous as one saying, ‘I can run fast enough between rain drops to avoid getting drenched.’ God’s mercy on his elect is fair as much as God’s justice is fair to all sinful mankind. Human desire or effort have no power to God’s sovereign decision. You cannot forfeit God’s selection by any means. Without his mercy, how can you and I be here to worship him today? Without his mercy how could we have known Jesus is the Messiah who offered himself as an atoning sacrifice for us? Without his mercy how could we be the dwelling address of the Holy spirit? Without his mercy how could we hope for God’s eternal kingdom adorned in his glory? Because of his mercy, we, who once were dead in our transgressions, are made alive having fellowship directly with God. Therefore, we believers are to thank him always and praise him. And no one can complain if he or she is not elected, nor can anyone argue on behalf of someone else condemned like Pharaoh here, who first hardened his heart out of pride and greed and whose heart was further hardened by God for he was not repenting. But God used even his enemy to display his power and to proclaim his glorious name in all the earth. Nonetheless, everyone has their own responsibility. Since God is not obligated to save anybody, we should not mistake God’s mercy for granted as if we are qualified to him.

Fifth, election leads to faith and holiness. Paul said in Romans 8:29a, *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...”* The power of election is to conform God’s elect like Jesus through sanctification. I will borrow Spurgeon’s word again, “From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” Our holy life does not affect God’s initial choice, but is the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in us, assuring his selection. This also implies our responsibility. This is the reason that we cannot proudly boast “I am elect.” But we have confidence that God selected me to have faith and become like Jesus through sanctification. John 15:16 says, *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last…”* Jacob’s life was controversial: ambitious and challenging, deceptive, struggling in relationships, faithful and hardworking, but he eventually confessed, “…*God has been my shepherd all my life to this day (Ge 48:15).”* God never fails to bring his chosen people to faith and sanctification and glorification, nor does he change his mind and word based on human condition. God is always the same yesterday and today and tomorrow. That’s why we have full confidence in God’s absolute guidance for our spiritual growth throughout life and eternal life.

Now it is most important for each one of us to joyfully accept God’s sovereignty in history and in our lives. We must see our lives in God’s point of view that he chose purely by his grace and fulfills his purpose. Without accepting his sovereignty we cannot begin to understand God’s work in our lives. Instead, we become rebellious and bitter and complain about everything. But when we accept God’s sovereignty we can find peace and meaning and the way to glorify God. Think about Paul’s life. He was born in Jewish family with dual citizenship in Tarsus. He was raised in strong Judaism doctrine and became a Pharisee who determined to annihilate Christian faith. He was an enemy of God in his ignorance with no hint of God’s elect. But the Risen Christ met him, called him, changed him to be an apostle of Gentiles and used him to fulfill his purpose utilizing even all his physical background. I didn’t know God when I was young. I never wished God’s selection. My current faith is not my merit, I was an enemy of God and deserved only condemnation. Who would care about me? Who would rescue me from destruction? But my amazing and awesome God came to me through his word and declared I am free from sin and judgment. I have great conviction that he is my God absolutely sovereign over my life. I understand he is my Father in heaven who foreknew me, chose me, called me and sanctifies me moment by moment until I enter the kingdom of God. I want to grow to deeper understanding of the truth and in the more intimate relationship with him. He always works for my good. What can I say then? “Thank you, God! Please fulfill your purpose in me.”

1. Only remnant will be saved (19-29)

Because God hardened Pharaoh’s heart to fulfill his purpose, some people may think, “Then why does God still blame us if God’s will is inevitable and there’s no way for human will?” Simply speaking, their argument is that “God made me do evil.” Is it right? No, not at all. This is a mysterious part that we may never fully grasp. But what does Paul say? Look at verses 20-21. **“But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”  Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?”** How dare you to talk back to God the Creator? He has all rights to make his creature for special purposes or for common use. It sounds like, “Shut your mouth. I’m your mother. No questions asked.” But in fact Paul was pointing out human’s God-defying attitude. Then what is his point? God chooses everyone’s destiny like Pharaoh or Moses in his sovereignty to show his wrath and power or to show the riches of his glory. But even though Pharaoh is prepared for destruction, God bears with great patience, waiting for his repentance to come back. It was the same to Judah Iscariot and millions and millions of sinners in the world. A pastor said, “We can be also either a Moses or a Pharaoh. As a Moses we are the recipients of God’s grace, and we are vessels which God will employ to demonstrate his mercy. If we rebel we will be used as Pharaoh, and by our hardening we will be vessels by which God will reveal his wrath on sin.” Now humans have nothing to say about this because he is Creator God and we are his creature, but we are just thankful for his mercy, and we must repent when God patiently warns us.

Then again after verse 6, people’s original charge that Israel’s failure might be the failure of the word of God, Paul explains that God chose a remnant in Israel by hardening the majority but God expended his mercy to the Gentiles like you and me. He cited OT prophecy in Hosea 2:23, **“I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one (25),”** and Hosea 1:10, **“In the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘children of the living God (26).’”** God told the prophet Hosea to marry an adulterous woman. He had 2 sons and a daughter through her, and God let him name his daughter Lo-Ruhamah, which means ‘not loved,’ and his second son Lo-Ammi, which means ‘not my people.’ But in the very same name, there are the words, ‘loved’ and ‘my people.’ It was the message to the adulterous Israelites like his prostitute wife, especially to the northern Israel. God declared they were not God’s people, but he promised them to be restored as God’s people out of his mercy and unceasing love. Isaiah clarified, **“Though the number of Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved (27).”** This means the population of racial Israelites will be uncountable, but the saved true Israelites will be a small group of remnants. If God did not leave them as remnants, all Israelites would have been completely destroyed as those in Sodom and Gomorrah (29). But God intervened and left some of them remnants for salvation, and there have been Jewish Christians since the Book of Acts. God never abandoned Israel, nor did his word fail. Rather, his remnant is extended to the Gentiles like us, who were not God’s people, who had no privileges, but who deserved only judgment. If God did not choose us in his great mercy, we would remain in God’s condemnation and will be thrown into the burning lake of sulfur and eternally tormented.

What can we say? Did we choose God? Did we earn God’s mercy by our works? Did our free will overrule God’s selection and determine our salvation? Not at all! It is God’s choice in his absolute sovereignty. It is undeserved mercy and grace of God. Because of Him, we are saved and have confidence of our eternal glorification in the kingdom of God. We will have perfect freedom without any reservation. We will be truly like Jesus and share heavenly glory with him. Thank God and praise God for his unconditional mercy and grace. Amen.