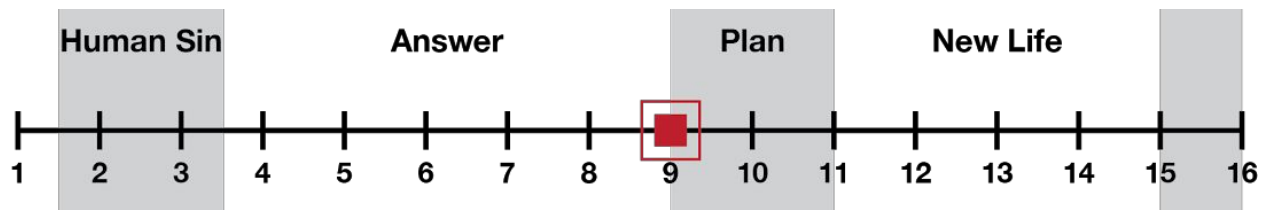


# Romans 9 | PREDESTINATION & ELECTION

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## Synopsis

Romans 9 anticipates the question that the discussion of Romans 4-8 might leave us asking: in light of all of the great promises, how does Israel fit in? But Paul responds by telling the story of Israel as they pertain to God's consistent promises in the Old Testament. The provocative verses rarely mean what we think they mean, and when we understand Paul's argument, we see that it is *not the case* that this chapter preaches that God unconditionally consigns some people to hell and some to heaven. Instead, this chapter is about Biblical election: the means by which God accomplishes the purpose of radically expanding the circle of salvation.

**\*\*DISCLAIMER:** this week will be quite a bit longer for commentary/prep. But this is a significant issue.

So here's **the win for this week:**

- 1) Try and understand how this section of Scripture fits within a) the argument of Romans, and b) the story of Scripture as a whole. This section of Scripture sums up theologically the story of God's purposes throughout the whole Old Testament (the New Testament and Eschaton are both addressed in chapters 10-11).
- 2) Clear up questions about predestination. People quote this passage of Scripture an overwhelming amount of the time in this debate. So you'll kick the ball pretty far downfield by getting students to understand that election is corporate, that Paul is talking about the Jews as a people group (and not talking about individuals), and that election isn't primarily about heaven/hell.

## What the Heck is Romans 9?

Romans 9 is one of the most provocative and most difficult sections of Scripture. A lot of people read Romans like this: Romans 1-8, the really cool, deep part of the gospel and God's love for us; Romans 12-16, the practical way to live out the gospel; and then Romans 9-11, some really odd stuff Paul wants to say about Israel and predestination. But this isn't some tacked-on few chapters. They are central to Paul's story of redemption. You'll probably

discuss predestination in group though, so the bottom of the commentary has a discussion of it.

## Read Romans 9

### The Argument

So here's the breakdown of Paul's main points:

**Rom 9:1-5, the Question:** The people of Israel are heirs to the promise! What about them? Did God go back on his promises?

**Rom 9:6a, Thesis:** No! God (and his Word) haven't somehow failed. The gentiles coming to faith isn't the backup plan for when the Jews rejected Jesus.

**Rom 9:6b-13, Abraham's Descendants:** Paul says that the promises to Abraham's descendants aren't just ethnic markers, not products of physical descent (9:8). Paul demonstrates this by contrasting two sons from two mothers, Isaac and Ishmael (9:7), and then contrasting two sons—twins even—from one mother, Jacob and Esau (9:13). God's chosen mechanism to bless the nations (Gen 12:3) depends only on God's purposes (9:11).

**Rom 9:14-18, Interjection, God Can Use Anyone:** God's promises don't depend on human opposition. God has the right to show mercy, or he can harden someone and incorporate them differently into his plan (a reference to Pharaoh). God responds to rebellion by working it for his purposes: Pharaoh's hardening displayed God's power; Israel's hardening led to salvation for the Gentiles (Rom 11:11).

**Rom 9:19-24, How God Shapes Israel:** God has the right to remold his people. Israel rebelled against God, and God is remolding them, but this time in an unprecedented way: he's invited Gentiles into the full promise.

**Rom 9:25-33, Scripture's Testimony:** Paul reminds the Jews and the Church that the scriptures weren't wrong; they always predicted and foretold that the current events would come to pass according to the purposes of God. Even Old Testament passages say that only a remnant of Israel will carry on the blessing. Scripture always testified to the current predicament. God fulfills his promises.

### Tricky Verses

Rom 9:11—This verse seems to imply that we're elected for salvation (or consigned to damnation) before we're born. But it's worth noting here that Paul's discussion on God's purposes isn't about heaven and hell. It's about through whom will God bless the nations.

Rom 9:13—This is a natural extension of the last one, but stronger: God hates and loves people before they've done anything to merit it. 2 things are worth noting. First, Paul is quoting Malachi 1, where the names "Jacob" and "Esau" refer to *nations* not individuals (Israel and Edom). The Bible often names nations after their Patriarch: Benjamites after Benjamin; Anakites after Anak; etc. This is the same. Second, love and hate in an election context don't mean salvation and

damnation. Esau looked to be a godly man (Gen 33). Why should we think from this verse God has consigned him to hell?

Rom 9:18—The impression here is that God makes some people evil (like Pharaoh) so that his purposes will be done. Paul quotes from Exodus 9:16, and we see in the preceding verse (9:15) that how God treated Pharaoh isn't some sort of violation of will. God allowed Pharaoh to continue in rebellion. Pharaoh was not made evil so that God could individually damn him. Rather, Scripture strongly suggests Pharaoh played a role in the hardening of his own heart (see Ex 8:15 and 1 Sam 6:6). Paul doesn't speak about Pharaoh's or any individual Israelite's eternal destination. Hardened does not mean damned. But ultimately—and this is the key point—Paul quoting this immediately connects Israel to Pharaoh in the minds of his audience. Paul is saying that Israel is like Pharaoh; Israel is now being hardened (Rom 11:7), just as Pharaoh went through hardening during the Exodus. And yet Israel will be saved.

Rom 9:21—The clay metaphor might seem to say that individual humans are passive matter, waiting for God to do what he wants to us. He can destroy or save us. In the context of Romans 9, Israel as a nation is questioning their role in God's plan. With that in mind, does Paul take a moment to pause and reflect on the metaphysics of an individual human being? Probably not. Israel is the clay, and Paul is trying to show that Israel's current shape is being used by God for God's purposes (which he explicitly states in Rom 11:11 & 11:30).

Rom 9:22—These verses make it seem like God sees two groups of people—those created for destruction, and those created for glory. We've already seen Paul tear down a wall between two seemingly separate groups (objects of mercy and objects of hardening in Rom 9:17-18). The same thing is happening in this section. Paul illustrates that a rigid divide between groups "prepared for destruction" and glory is illusory. Here, even Israel, God's blessed people, are those objects prepared for destruction. But Romans 11 gives hope that eventually Israel will come back into the fold.

So the above discussion should lead you to question a few things about Romans 9. 1) You should be suspicious of any interpretation that takes the eternal destination of individuals (heaven/hell) as the main point of Romans 9. It's not. This is about Israel as a group. 2) You should be suspicious of any interpretation that takes election as indicating salvation and damnation. God's promises about election for Israel aren't about heaven; Genesis 12 makes it clear: God elected Israel to be the mechanism through which he blesses all the earth. 3) You should be suspicious of any interpretation of Romans 9 that delineates two, wholly separate groups in opposition to each other with no overlap: loved and hated; objects of mercy and objects of hardening/wrath; prepared for glory and prepared for destruction; saved and damned. Paul blurs categorical lines. To Israel are given the promises (9:4), but Israel is hardened (11:7). Israel is God's chosen people, but now they're unruly clay. Israel deserves wrath (9:22) having murdered Christ, but Israel will be saved (11:26).

## Predestination

So how do we discuss predestination in light of this discussion? People quote Romans 9 a lot in this debate, so walking through those last points will help. But the reality is that this chapter is still really odd and suggestive, and predestination is a topic that goes beyond just this chapter. But here are a few thoughts on what predestination teaches and how to respond.

Predestination says that God chooses who is saved. People don't play a part. Salvation isn't something we "receive" or "accept," it's something that God does. And God's choice happens before people are born. It's an eternal decree. God doesn't save or not-save people based on what they've done or not done, what they believe or don't believe. But instead he saves—and *grants belief* to—some people and not others for his own reasons. This chapter of Romans can be read with this in mind. The references to election, loving and hating, destruction, wrath, mercy, and hardening can all seem to indicate these two groups of people—the elect (saved and going to heaven) and the non-elect (those "passed over" and damned). And there are some other Scripture verses that suggest some of these doctrines as well. Many Christians believe this reading of scripture, but ultimately we think (along with the majority of Christian tradition) it isn't the best reading.

Two key issues are at stake here: the character of God and justice. Any relevant conception of justice includes responsibility and culpability. Under the doctrines of predestination, before any human had done anything wrong, God assigned him a place—heaven or hell. Would we recognize this as justice? Throwing a criminal into jail is justice, but would throwing a newborn be? God's judgment preceded any action. The eternal decree was set before birth, is unaffected by action, and refuses to take human choice into account. Now it may be said that God doesn't actively condemn anyone, but instead "passes over" those he doesn't save. But God could save all, and strict predestinarians admit that God not-saving implies God damning.

Christianity holds that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that God wants all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:3-4). So some natural questions come up: how does a God with these attributes choose not to save some people? Why send them to hell? The predestinarian may throw some remarks out about how this magnifies the glory of God, but what kind of God gets glory from people burning in hell who had no choice about it? So to believe predestination you have to qualify those Scripture passages and say God is only love to the elect (as Calvin did), *and* you have to be comfortable with a God who—for his own glory—condemns people to hell based solely on his decision.

There are many facets to this theological debate, including much more Scriptural dispute. But along with Scriptural reasons, historically these two implications—on God's love and justice—kept most Christians from confirming predestination in the modern Calvinist sense. Instead, God's offer of salvation extends to all, and through the power of his grace every human is given an opportunity to respond to God's call. It's on the basis of this

response—this choice—that God judges humanity. But this isn't predestination. For them, there is no offer, and grace is not for all.

## ② Questions

Have you read Romans 9 before? What is your impression of Paul's message after first reading it?

How does Romans 9 fit within the story of Scripture as a whole?

Have you heard many messages or sermons on Romans 9? What has your exposure to this section of Scripture looked like from Christian leaders?

How does Romans 9 fit within the discussion of Romans 1-8? Is it a hard left turn, or is there a connecting thread somewhere?

How do you usually understand "hardening"? Does the Bible give us a clear definition of what hardening is? [Have students look up various passages that mention it, particularly about Pharaoh.]

What do you think election means? Who are the elect? How do you know if you're elect?

Read Romans 11:25-32. How does this passage affect how we read Romans 9 and Paul's discussion of Israel?

What do you think the "stumbling stone" is in 9:30-33? How is it that Israel stumbled over it?

## ② Application Questions

What is the point of reading Romans 9 for a college student? How is this Scripture relevant to us?

Is this debate even important? Where is the boundary between unity and truth?

How do we disagree with people and still respect them in this debate? How do we still treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ?

Have you seen the doctrine of predestination or the rejection of predestination affect how non-Christians view Christianity? Have you met people who one of these two doctrines turned off from God?

What practical ways can we grow in our understanding in the midst of debates? What are healthy ways and unhealthy ways to learn? To engage?

God's control over how his promise to bless the nations comes about is clearly his choice, sovereign. Does rejecting God's control of who is and isn't saved reduce his sovereignty?

Should the majority of Church tradition rejecting salvific predestination weigh in on the debate? Does the breadth of a belief affect whether we should accept it?

Predestination is a Biblical word. How can we understand it without distorting it?

What other Bible passages are relevant to the predestination debate? How do we deal with these?

Do humans have free will? How does this intersect with God's purposes?








Does judgment require us having a choice?

If God doesn't save everyone, is he still loving? Even if humans have free will is God still on the hook for sending people to hell?

### Accountability

It's possible (if not likely) that this discussion flared up some disagreements between members of the group. But even if it didn't this discussion is probably the largest point of conflict within Protestant Christianity. So talking about how to love each other through major disagreements like this is important. Conflict management is a great exercise in discipleship.

### Resource Toolbox

-  [William Lane Craig on Romans 9](#)
-  [N. T. Wright on Predestination and Romans 9-11](#)
-  [Ben Witherington III on Romans 9-11](#)
-  [Jerry Walls on Calvinism](#)
-  [Greg Boyd on Romans 9](#)
-  [A Structure and Summary of Romans 9-11](#)
-  [Jerry Walls - \*Why I'm not a Calvinist\*](#)