

WHY DO SO FEW COME TO FAITH?

Romans 9:1-29

In our study of God's Word we encounter truths that seem to contradict one another. We call these *antinomies*. **An antinomy is two things that are both true, but they appear to contradict each other.** The most common antinomy is the Trinity. The Bible reveals that God is one. The Bible reveals that God is three. All attempts to illustrate or explain the Trinity fall apart because the Trinity is incomprehensible to the human mind. Attempts to "make sense" of antinomies usually lead to over-emphasizing one truth over the other. Over-emphasizing God is one has led to the heresy of Modalism. Modalism teaches there is one God Who expresses Himself in three different modes. Sometimes he expresses himself as the father. Other times as the Son. Still other times as the Spirit.

The proper way to respond to antinomies is to accept the tension and mystery and believe both truths in balance. There is tension. There is mystery. But if the Bible reveals both truths, in this case the one and three nature of God, then we accept both truths by faith. We accept our inability to fully comprehend the Trinity. We accept that God is mysterious and majestic and that His ways are higher than our ways.

As we study Romans 9-11 we come face to face with another antinomy. This is the antinomy of God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign; that He is fully in control of the entire universe. Everything that happens in the universe is something He wills and allows to happen. In the area of salvation the Bible teaches God foreknows, elects, and predestines each person who is saved. On the other hand, the Bible teaches human responsibility. The Bible teaches that each person is individually responsible for his or her moral choices. We have free will. The Bible constantly exhorts us to believe in Jesus and when we believe the Bible continues to instruct us to live godly lives. The Bible reveals that God holds people accountable for the choices they make whether they are believers or unbelievers.

The Bible reveals that God is sovereign and that He elects specific individuals to salvation. The Bible equally reveals that Man is responsible to respond to God in faith. We must freely put our faith in Jesus for salvation. God chooses and we must choose. Both are true because both are revealed in God's Word.

Staying balanced and believing both these truths in a balanced way is more challenging than holding to the truths of the one and three God of the Trinity. That's because this antinomy of God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility immediately becomes personal because it involves us and the people closest to us. The truth that God elects some to salvation and not all is troubling. We can't reconcile the truth that God's election does not override or negate the necessity that we freely exercise our will and put our faith in Jesus.

Difficult as these and other questions are, the proper way to respond to the antinomy of God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility is to accept both by faith because the Bible is God's inspired revelation to us of the truth. Our faith is encouraged also by the fact that God is love; that He is righteous and good in all His ways. And that somehow, in ways known only to Him, His election does not contradict His love for the entire world.

I recommend Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum's book, *God's Will & Man's Will* for a biblical and balanced view of God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility

In Romans 9-11 the Apostle Paul deals with God's program for national Israel in light of Israel's rejection of Jesus. In chapter 9 Paul shows the divine cause of Israel's condition and in chapter 10 he shows the human cause of Israel's condition.

In Romans 9:6-29 we discover that God has elected only a small number of Jews to be saved in this dispensation. The same can be said about gentiles, but Paul's primary focus in these verses is upon Israel.

THE BIG PICTURE:

National Israel Is Under A Partial Hardening Until The Complete Number Of Gentiles Elected To Be Saved In This Dispensation Is Fulfilled.

- **God Elects A Remnant Of Jews In Every Generation (11:1-6)**
- **God Hardens The Rest Of The Jews In Every Generation (11:7-10)**

THE DIVINE SIDE OF ISRAEL'S EXPERIENCE DURING THE DISPENSATION OF GRACE (9:6-29)

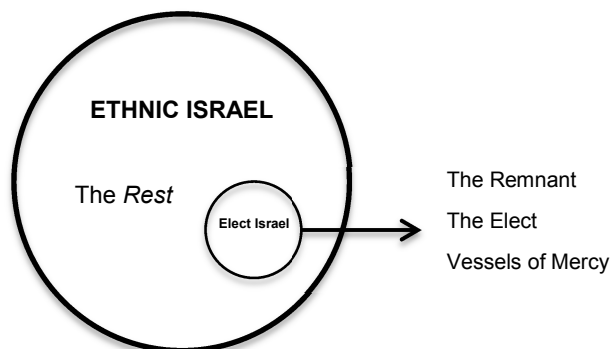
God Elects Only A Remnant Of Jews To Be Saved (9:6-13)

Romans 9:6 (ESV)

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,

The point of verse 6 is that salvation was never guaranteed to a person because they were an ethnic Israelite. Salvation and God's covenant promises were never guaranteed to physical Israel, to ethnic Israel. Salvation is guaranteed every Jew elected by God for salvation.

This corrects a misunderstanding I've encountered on a number of occasions – that all Jews who have ever lived or will ever live will all go to heaven because they are the Chosen People. Salvation and God's blessings were never guaranteed on the basis of Jewish ethnicity. Salvation is guaranteed to every Jew elected by God for salvation. Every Jew thus elected will, by their own free will, trust in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Elect Israel will enjoy the promises of God.



Elect Israel is a subset of ethnic Israel. Elect Israel includes Jewish men, women and children chosen by God in eternity past to be saved by faith in Jesus. Later in chapters 9 & 11 Paul refers to the Remnant chosen by grace. Elect Israel and the Remnant refer to the same subset of ethnic Israel.

In every generation of this Dispensation of Grace¹, God elected/chose a small number of Jewish men, women and children to be saved by faith in Jesus. The divine reason the entire nation of Israel is not saved is because God did not elect the majority for salvation.

This "whittling down" by divine election is not new to Israel. The Apostle Paul gives two examples from Israel's history in which the number of those receiving God's promises and blessings was reduced by God's election.

Romans 9:6-13 (ESV)

6 *But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."* **8**

¹ Dispensations are separate periods of time in which God dispenses His will in a specific and unique way, based on a covenant upon which a particular dispensation is founded. We are in the dispensation of Grace. Certainly, God was gracious before the Coming of Jesus, but with the coming of Jesus, there was a totally unique display of grace. This is why it is called the Dispensation of Grace. This dispensation extends from Acts 2:1, with the beginning of the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, through Revelation 19:21. It covers the entire period of the Church Age, and also includes the seven years of the Great Tribulation. It is based on the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-32).

This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. 9 For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son." 10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— 12 she was told, "The older will serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

The number of Abraham's physical descendants receiving His promises and blessings was reduced first by God's sovereign chose of Isaac and not Ishmael or Abraham's six sons by Keturah (Gen. 25:1-2). God further reduced the number of Abraham's physical descendants receiving His promises by choosing Jacob and not Esau. As Paul emphasizes, God does not choose on the basis of what Isaac, Esau or Jacob did, but on the basis of His sovereign will alone.

Here in verses 6-13, the Apostle Paul is explaining, from the divine side, why the number of Jews coming to faith in this dispensation is so small. It is because of divine election. God has elected only a remnant of Jews in each generation of this dispensation to be saved by faith in Jesus.

In verses 14-18 the Apostle Paul explains that God's sovereignty includes showing mercy to some and hardening others.

God Sovereignly Chooses To Show Mercy To Some (The Remnant) and He Sovereignly Chooses To Harden Others (The Rest) To Accomplish His Purposes (Gentile Salvation) (9:14-18)

Romans 9:14 (ESV)

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!

Is it fair for God to choose some and not all? Is God's election unfair?

That God chooses any is grace. The Bible teaches the doctrine of Total Depravity. Total depravity means that in the Fall of Adam, mankind fell into a state of sin and lost all ability to do any spiritual good. We are separated from God in our sin. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves right with God. We don't want God to be God on His terms; we create gods in our image (1:22-23). Left to ourselves we cannot save ourselves and our eternal destiny is to remain separated from God for all eternity.

Without divine election, none of us would be saved. So there is no injustice on God's part when He elects some to be saved. Our difficulty is that He doesn't choose all. We must trust Him that divine election accords with His love for all.

The Apostle Paul's answer moves in a different direction. Not only is there no injustice in divine election, but God has the right to show mercy to whomever He chooses and to harden whomever He chooses. Again, Paul illustrates this aspect of divine election from Israel's history.

Romans 9:14-18 (ESV)

14 *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.*

To whom is God showing mercy among the Israelites?

The Remnant; the small number of Jews God elected in eternity past to be saved by faith in Jesus.

Whom is God hardening among the Israelites?

The Rest; the majority of Jews who reject Jesus and the offer of salvation by faith (11:7-10).

In these verses the Apostle Paul is showing that the mercy shown the Remnant is according to God's sovereign election and the hardening of the Rest is likewise according to God's sovereign will.

This raises another objection which Paul articulates in verse 19.

God Is Sovereign Because He Is Creator: He Can Do With His Creation What He Wants (9:19-26)

Romans 9:19 (ESV)

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"

The accusation against God concerns those He hardens. Those He hardens are not chosen for salvation. Therefore, they are not enabled to believe in Jesus, but can only continue in their sin and unbelief. And in punishment, God hardens them. The accuser is arguing that if the Rest are not enabled to believe, God is unjust in hardening them.

Paul doesn't answer this accusation directly, but rebukes the accuser that the question is inappropriate. It is inappropriate because God, the Creator, is sovereign over everything He has made. In other words, God can do whatever He wants with what He has made. And, because He is God, whatever He does is by definition just and good.

Romans 9:19–26 (ESV)

19 *You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? 20 But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? 22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— 24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? 25 As indeed he says in Hosea,*

*"Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,'
and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.' "*

26 *"And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,'
there they will be called 'sons of the living God.' "*

God, the Creator, has the right to make of His creation whatever He desires.

Verses 22-24 is a description of God's plan for national Israel in this Dispensation of Grace. The *vessels of wrath* are the Jewish majority He hardens in each generation of this dispensation. He *endures* these *vessels of wrath* in each generation and from generation to generation in that He doesn't judge and remove them immediately but allows them to live their physical lives while He pursues His mission to reach the Gentiles with the Gospel.

The *vessels of mercy* are the Jewish Remnant He chose in eternity past to be saved in each generation during this dispensation. We discover in verse 24 that the *vessels of mercy* also include all Gentiles chosen by God to be saved in this dispensation.

The quote from Hosea reflects God's plan and purpose for national Israel in this Dispensation of Grace. The partial hardening of national Israel is for the purpose of saving the full number of Gentiles chosen by God for salvation in this dispensation. In every generation of this dispensation, God gathers to Himself a people for His name made up of both elect Jews and elect Gentiles.

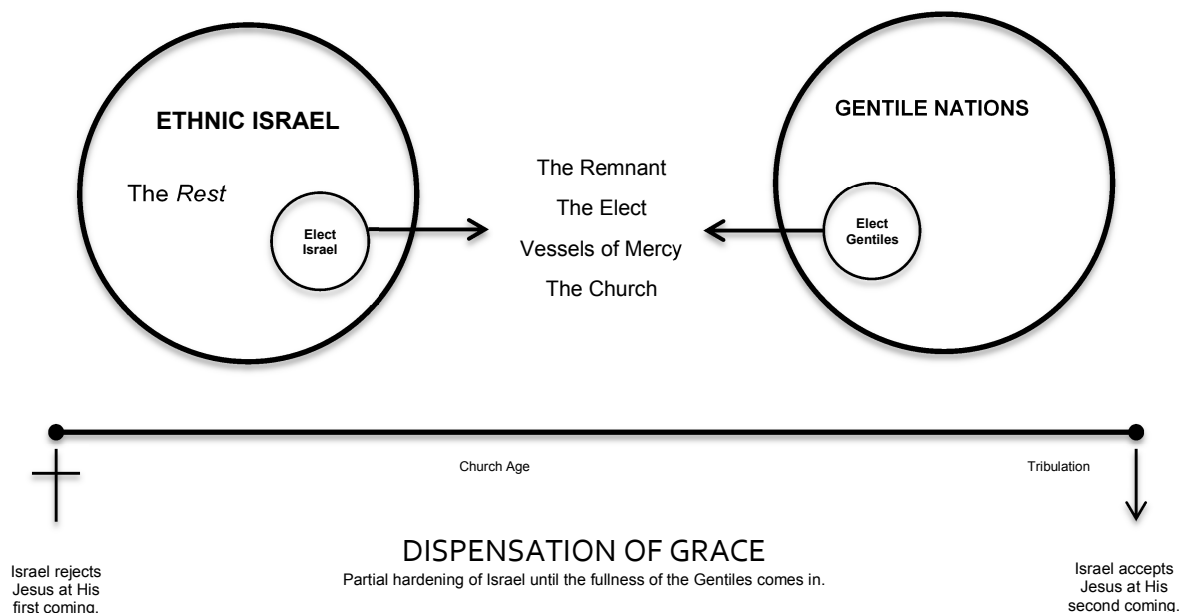
In verses 27-29 Paul shows that the election of the Remnant is the fulfillment of His divine prediction through Isaiah.

God Is Fulfilling What He Revealed Through The Prophet Isaiah (9:27-29)

Romans 9:27–29 (ESV)

27 *And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, 28 for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." 29 And as Isaiah predicted,*

*"If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah."*



In Romans 9, the Apostle Paul explains the divine side of the partial hardening of national Israel during the Dispensation of Grace. In eternity past, God elected a Remnant of Jews and Gentiles to be saved in every generation of this dispensation. Likewise, God hardens the Jewish majority in every generation in their unbelief.

Because He is the Creator, God has the sovereign right to do what He wants with His creation. He has the right to show mercy to the Remnant and He has the right to harden the Rest.

We've also learned that without divine election no human being would be saved. Divine election is an act of divine grace. This passage also teaches that divine election is not based on human works. God does not elect based on knowing who would believe because left to ourselves, none of us would believe in Jesus for salvation. Therefore election is purely on the basis of grace and the sovereign will of God.

In our next study we will discover the human reason for the partial hardening of Israel.

The Bible clearly teaches God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility. We need to believe both though we cannot reconcile them. To keep our balance...

...we should never speculate nor presume to know who is elect and who is nonelect.

...we should relate to everyone as if they are the elect and preach the Gospel to all.