

# Gamma

Romans 9:1-29

## Study 16 God's sovereignty

### Question 1

**Many people immediately question how it can be fair for God to choose some people for salvation and not others. Look at Romans 9:14-16 and discuss the logic of Paul's argument**

Paul clearly has taught this material before. He has just stated that when people don't believe, it is because God has not chosen them. Immediately he says, "What then shall we say, that God is unjust?" (v.14) He writes that question, of course, because he knows that is always the first reaction of everyone who hears this teaching! It is normal to ask: "To choose only some and not all — that is not fair!" But Paul counters, "*Not at all!*"

Here in vv.14-16 he reminds us that God had mercy upon Moses. Why? "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy." At first that sounds almost like the words of an arbitrary bully, until we reflect. Mercy, by its very definition cannot ever be an obligation. To say, something is "unfair" is to say that *it is owed*. But a mercy is *undeserved*, and thus is totally free. See Paul's argument? To say, "It is unfair for God to only have mercy on some," is a self-contradictory statement. Paul is reasoning: "Are you saying that God owes *anyone* salvation? Of course not! But if he owes no one salvation, then he is free to give it to a) all, b) some, or c) none." John Stott says:

"Paul's way of defending God's justice is to proclaim his mercy. It sounds like a complete non sequitur. But it is not. It simply indicates that the question itself is misconceived, because the basis on which God deals savingly with sinners is not justice, but mercy. For salvation "does not... depend on man's desire or effort" that is, on anything we want or strive for, "but on God's mercy" (16).

As an example, remember the rich person who decided to choose 20 inner city kids to guarantee their full college tuition. The analogy is not perfect — we know that this man screened people for families who were better prospects than others. But the point is, there were literally thousands of equally worthy recipients. We also know that the rich man could have helped a lot more than 20. But did anyone say that, since he helped some, he was being unfair to everyone else? No. He had no particular obligation to help any of the children. Since all he gave was sheer mercy, there could be no talk about being "unfair."

“[Paul is saying]: ‘If you want to bring in the notion of justice, very well — you will get your wages, you will get what you deserve, and the wages of sin is death! If God’s [salvation were totally] a matter of justice and righteousness, all would be damned; nobody has any claim upon God’s mercy.’ The fact that anybody has ever received mercy is entirely because of the character and nature of God. The real mystery is not that everybody is not saved, but that anybody is saved — that is the mystery! God owes nothing to anybody...”

– D.M. Lloyd-Jones

## Question 2

**“Here are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. They are friends of mine. I find out about it and plead with them. I beg them not to do it. Finally they push me out of the way and they start out. I tackle one of the men and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they are captured, convicted, sentenced... The one man who was not involved in the robbery goes free.**

**Now I ask you: Whose fault was it that the other men died?**

**Now this other man who is walking around free, can he say, ‘Because my heart is so good, I am a free man?’**

The only reason that he is free is because of me; I restrained him. So those have no one to blame but themselves. But those who go to heaven have no one to praise but Jesus Christ. Thus we see that salvation is all of grace from beginning to its end.”

– D.J.Kennedy, *Truths That Transform*

## Question 3

**If God is so powerful and so loving and willing that none should die and go to hell why doesn’t he save everyone?**

Someone says: “But I believe that though God doesn’t want us to be lost, some are lost because they choose wrong and God will not violate their freedom of choice.” But why is freedom of choice sacrosanct? I try to honor my child’s freedom of will, but not if I see he is about to be killed by it! Why can’t God “insult” our freedom of will for a moment and save us for eternity? No — regardless of whether you think we are saved by our choice or by God’s election, you still have the same question: Why couldn’t God save us all if he has the power and desire to do so? It is a hard question, but it cannot be used as an argument against the doctrine of election.

We can go further. Suppose election is not true, that eons ago, God set up salvation upon this system — that every person will have equal ability to accept or reject Christ, who will die and be raised and be presented through the gospel message. But the moment God determined to set up salvation on that system (assuming for the moment that he did), he would have immediately known exactly which persons would be saved and which condemned on that basis. So the minute he “set it up,” he was *de facto* electing some and passing over others.

We all come out to the same place. God could save all, but he doesn't. Why not? We can only know two things:

1) The answer must have something to do with his perfect nature. He is perfectly loving and perfectly righteous and neither can be preferred over the other or he would not be God. So somehow the answer has to do with his being consistent with himself.

2) We cannot see the whole picture. Why? If we can conceive of a more merciful system of salvation than God has, we must not see it aright, for God is more merciful than us or even than our imaginations. When we finally see the whole plan and answer, we will not be able to find fault with it.

#### Question 4

**Look at the difficult verses Rom 9: 17-23 What does it mean that God ‘hardens’? How does Paul then in verses 19-22 refute the charge that God is unfair to choose some and reject others?**

These verses are pretty difficult, but they make sense after some reflection.

In vv.17-18 Paul recalls the hardening of Pharaoh's heart against Moses and Israel. Thus Paul uses Pharaoh as a case study of how God's sovereignty relates to human responsibility. If we go back to Exodus 4-14 and read, we see a fascinating picture. On the one hand, the Bible tells us that *God* hardened Pharaoh's heart. “I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.” (Exod 4:21. See also 7:3; 10:1, etc.). God says that he hardened Pharaoh's heart to fulfill his plan (11:9) But on the other hand, we are told that “Pharaoh hardened his heart” (Exod 8:15. See also 8:19; 9:7,17,27 etc.) And God tells Pharaoh that he is being punished because he hardened himself (See 9:13-18).

What is the Bible saying about hardening? Some think that Pharaoh was a fine fellow, but God came and turned his heart hard and cold. But that is not a fair interpretation. If we look at Exodus itself, there are as many statements about *Pharaoh* hardening his heart as that God hardened his heart. Somehow, both

are true. But in addition, Paul has already spoken to this in Romans 1:24. He has said that our hearts are full of lusts, and “therefore God gave them up to their desires.” So Paul already has spoken to this. *God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was a “giving him up” to his own stubbornness.* When God hardens someone, he doesn’t create the hardness, but he simply allows them to go their own way.

“The world fell into sin, but God put a limit, a restraint upon it, and this world would be complete chaos and hell if He did not do so. But the moment He draws back his restraining influence [at any point] there is hardening [there]... The withdrawal of the sun produces hardening ground. So that is one of the ways God produces hardening — he leaves them to themselves...”

– D.M. Lloyd-Jones

Next Paul makes a further case for why God is not unfair. To have mercy on some and to pass over others.

vv.20-21. Here he says that God made us, and that therefore he has *rights of ownership*. All by itself, this would probably be a sufficient answer to the question of “fairness.” “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” We are so far below God, that we have neither the wisdom nor the right to question our creator.

vv.22-23. Here he says that God is showing the riches of his glory through having mercy on some and passing over others. This is the heart of the mystery! Somehow,

if God had mercy on *all* or condemned *all* we would not see his glory. I don’t think Paul is giving us much more than a hint here, but it is a very suggestive hint. For the biggest question is: If God *could* save everyone, why doesn’t he? And here Paul says that God’s chosen course (to save some and leave others) will in the end be more fit to show forth God’s glory than any other scheme we can imagine.

C. vv.22-23. Here Paul also says that “while God is the author of our salvation, we are the authors of our damnation.” Notice the important differences between the vessels of wrath and the vessels of mercy. (1) God “bore with great patience the objects of his wrath.” This shows that evil people are not *made* evil by God. He bears with them. He never gives anyone quite what they deserve. He is unjust to no one. (2) Notice that the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction, but it doesn’t say by whom. But it says clearly that the vessels of mercy are prepared for glory by he, God. By implication, the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction by themselves (remember Romans 1:24).

In summary, in election, God comes in and softens our hearts and makes us good, but in hardening, God simply passes over and lets people have the way they have chosen.

“If anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God’s. This antinomy contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history, and experience.”

– John Stott

### Question 5

**How does the Election help us in our spiritual walk with the Lord especially our worship?**

- A. It is extremely helpful to worship. Nothing can fill you with so much praise and joy as to realize that not one molecule of credit for your salvation belongs to you, but to the Lord. “Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory” (Psalm 115:1) If I can take any of the credit, I can praise myself — but since I can take no credit, God gets all the praise.
- B. It is humbling. People who know this doctrine are able to look at others and truly, literally say, “there but for the grace of God go I.” Without believing in election, that kind of talk is only relative. When we see people who disbelieve, or who are leading immoral lives, or who are in other ways foolish or wicked, we have a tendency to think that our openness, our moral sense, or willingness to repent is the difference between them and us. But the doctrine of election humbles us. We even get humbled about our humility, for even that is a gift! We now treat everyone with respect and condescend to no one.
- C. It makes us hopeful about others. Some think that ‘election’ makes us less motivated to witness. But not so. Now I know that it is not my eloquence that will win people, nor their open minds. In fact, ‘election’ means we can treat *anyone*, even the worst cases, with great hope, because God can work with any kind of material. It doesn’t matter how noble and “together” we are.
- D. It makes us confident. God is truly in charge, and he is committed to me!

## Meditation

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

(Romans 9:25-26 ESV)

What wrong attitudes do I need to repent of

What is it in these verses that bring comfort.

What is it in these verses that build me up

Meditate on these for the next week and come back to share with each other how God has spoken to you through the Holy Spirit.