

# God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility in Salvation

## Romans 9-10

Andrew R. Rappaport

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### Introduction

There is a need to discuss the sovereignty of God in missions today because it is so ignored in many of our churches. The doctrine of God's sovereignty is avoided because many desire to avoid topics like sin, God's wrath, the sovereignty of God, and others that seem controversial. Many churches would rather bow to marketing techniques and rely on the ability of man in an effort capitalize on the emotions of others. Too many pastors have forgotten that it is God's church, not theirs. It is God who brings the people into His family and not man's creative promotion. For this purpose we should look at God's sovereignty in missions, specifically in the act of salvation.

Why is the doctrine of God's sovereignty a difficult doctrine for people to accept? Because if God is sovereign, man is not. We sinfully desire sovereignty for ourselves. From Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden to the current ideology that we evolved from monkeys, men aim to eliminate God and set themselves up in His place. Men want full control over their lives. The reality is that only One has the proper authority for that sovereignty: God. However, we keep fighting to take it. God's sovereignty is unattractive to sinful men because it means that men must submit to God, not God to men.

This message will focus specifically on the view of God's sovereignty in the area of salvation, which is at the heart of missions. The question that gets asked often when discussing God's sovereignty in salvation is that of man's role. Does a man have responsibility, or does he not? Many believe that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility cannot coexist, as though they are two mutually exclusive ideas. Are they?

I will attempt to answer and clarify thousands of years of debate, but I am deliberately avoid labels and instead focus on the definition of terms. Please do not assume you know what I believe only to put me into a theological box. Listen closely, and you may just find that you agree with me. Many debate, but few listen. Please do not label me—or at least, do not label me until I finish. Labels are good only if all agree on the definitions of the terms. However, because many do not agree on the definitions for the labels in this discussion, they, in fact, are used to separate the body of Christ in areas where there should really be unity. This message is an attempt to show that the doctrine of God's sovereignty brings unity to the Christian community rather than dividing it.

### I. God's Sovereignty in Election (vs. 9:6-23)

Some may argue that Romans 9 is not discussing God's personal election of men but instead God's sovereign election of the nation of Israel. Although the latter interpretation clearly fits into the context of the passage of Romans 9 – 11, Paul is using this illustration of Israel to apply to the personal election of men, both Jew and Gentile. Both the Jews and the Gentiles, Paul says, can be children of the promise. In essence, Paul says Israel's election is a picture of personal election.

Paul is making the argument that people are not children of God just because they are born of the lineage of Abraham. A child of God is one who has faith in God (v. 8). Abraham had at least eight children, six of whom are named in Genesis 25:2. Therefore, Isaac could not claim to be the only son of Abraham. He was not even the first-born son of Abraham— Ishmael was. Paul's argument of God's sovereignty in election then is that the promise did not come from the first-born son but instead the son of the promise, the second-born son.

Some may argue that Isaac is the right heir of Abraham and not Ishmael because Ishmael was born of a concubine and not a wife. However, God through Paul makes the point clear. God not only

chose Abraham's second son, but also Isaac's (Romans 9:10-13). God elected Jacob and not Esau. Jacob and Esau were twins, but Esau was the first-born. In the local customs of the time, Esau, even though he was a twin, would have the full rights of the heir. However, before either of these two boys was even born, God elected one and not the other. Paul makes this very clear by stating that God told Rebecca, "*The older shall serve the younger*" (v. 12). Verse 11 states the reason God had for this decision: "*for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls.*" Paul says it was for this purpose that God's election might stand, not of Jacob's works but God's calling. The choice of Jacob over Esau was God's choosing.

If we understand what Paul is saying, then we should be asking the question as Paul does in verse 14. "*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!*" Clearly, if salvation is completely the election of God, and He chooses one person over another, Paul knows that this answer seems unfair or even unjust to man.

However, Paul will prove that it is fair and that God is not unjust. This is crucial to understanding the sovereignty of God. If we do not take the time to understand Paul's argument, we will create our own views of God, ones in which we, not He, are ultimately sovereign.

## **A. God's Sovereignty Displayed**

The one thing that MUST be remembered in discussing God's sovereignty is that God is God. I know it sounds simple, but think about it. It is God who formed the universe. It is God who made the earth. It is God who gives life. It is God who shows mercy and compassion on whom He chooses (v. 15). We cannot separate the fact that God as God has the right and the authority to create His creation any way He wants. The universe is His to control, *and so are we*. From the smallest element of an atom to the entirety of the universe, God formed everything out of nothing. Not one piece of His creation is outside God's control. If there is a single atom in the entire universe that is outside God's control, then He is not sovereign. Nothing is outside His control.

Verse 16 says, "*So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.*"

Paul goes so far as to state that God not only is righteous in electing some for mercy, but He is righteous in hardening the hearts of others, like Pharaoh of Egypt during the time of Moses. This may seem hard to understand, but if one does not accept what God through Paul is stating here, he will never properly understand God's sovereignty.

We need to start at the beginning. When in the Garden of Eden Adam attempted to become the sovereign of the world, humanity fell. This fall has caused ALL of humanity to be conceived with a sinful nature, whether we like it or not. The sinful nature of man means that we ALL sin and are sinners. Therefore, we are ALL under the judgment of God. Every person born into this world starts out evil and is destined for judgment and hell.

The reason people would ask Paul if God is unjust is because they believe that they are naturally in good, or at best neutral, standing with God. However, we are God's enemies (Romans 1:30; 8:7; James 4:4). Every person's starting point in life is not heaven but hell. Therefore, it is not God's mercy, not His justice, that should be the focal point when we discuss His election. That is why Paul quotes from the Old Testament to remind readers that God has the right to show mercy on whomever He wants. God does not damn people to hell; they are already on their way there the second they are conceived due to the inherited sin nature. The fact that God shows mercy on anyone is the amazing thing. Instead of questioning the justice of God by assuming that God is obligated to show mercy to everyone, we should instead be asking in humility how or why God shows mercy on anyone at all.

If you have followed the reasoning thus far, you should be asking, as Paul expects to be asked, “*You will say to me then, ‘Why does [God] still find fault? For who has resisted His will?’*” (verse 19). In other words, if God is the One to show mercy, and it is completely His decision, then how can people be held responsible? After all, no one can resist God’s will. Many people stumble over this question. Most people end up in one of two camps after reading this passage. Either salvation is all of God, man having no responsibility, or it is ultimately man’s choice, God having no sovereignty.

Want the answer? Wait until chapter 10. We must first build the foundation of the argument as Paul does. No jumping to the end of the book to see “whodunit.”

In short, the answer to the questions of verse 19 are answered in verse 20. As Job found out the hard way, God does not have to answer man, but man has to answer God. Who is man that God is required to submit to his thoughts and desires? God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are above our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8).

God is sovereign in salvation because God is the Creator of man. Like a potter, He can make the vessel for whatever purpose He has for the vessel. Many ask how God can choose to save some and not others. Somehow, people think that God is required to save all people or none. Furthermore, no one seems to think that none is an option, and so they say that either God must save all people or at least give each person an equal “chance” of being saved, and, therefore, it must be man’s choice and not God’s. In other words, if the choice in salvation is God’s, then He must choose all people in order to be fair, but if the choice is man’s, then God is fair. The problem with this thinking is that God’s glory is also shown in the vessels made for wrath by virtue of those that He shows mercy.

Notice that the vessels for mercy are “*prepared beforehand for glory,*” but the “*vessels of wrath*” are “*prepared for destruction.*” Those vessels of wrath are already on their way to destruction. It is only those vessels of mercy that had to be prepared “*beforehand.*” It is not that God desires for people to be destroyed, but that He is longsuffering with them (2 Peter 3:9). In fact, verse 22 states that God created them that He would have to suffer long with them.

A jeweller presents bright, clear diamonds on a black velvet background to display the contrast; it is this contrast that reveals the beauty of the diamonds. So it is with God’s mercy. God’s mercy is displayed best when contrasted against His wrath. Therefore, He prepares some vessels for wrath, while others for mercy.

Many people question the basis of God’s election. If God does elect some for mercy, then how does He choose? Some say it must be based on the works of men, but verse 11, along with many other passages, clearly states that it was not of works (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). Others will suggest that if God’s election is not based on man’s works, then it must be that God’s choice is based on man’s choice for God. However, that is not what this passage states. This passage clearly states that God does the choosing not based on anything that man has done. So what is the basis of God’s election? It is simply this: God’s election is based on God’s glory and God’s glory alone. The purpose of God’s election is to display His mercy.

Salvation is for God to show His mercy. It is not for man. It is not about man. It is about God!

If God sent all men to Hell, there would be no display of His mercy. Therefore, He has shown mercy on whom He wills. It is because God, as the sovereign of the universe, has the right and the authority to elect some to mercy. There is no way to understand God’s election to mercy unless we understand God’s sovereignty. That is Paul’s whole basis of his argument in this passage. God is sovereign and can do whatever He wills and does not have to answer to men, angels, or anything else for His decisions *because He is sovereign.*

## B. The Character of God

At this point, some may say that I sound like a hyper-Calvinist. However, like Paul, I am providing salvation from God's view. The reason this issue is so difficult to understand is because people mistakenly assume that only one action causes a single reaction. In other words, either God chooses, or man chooses, but it cannot be both. Well, let us do a little study into another doctrine before we proceed to Romans chapter 10 to better understand the character of God.

Most Christians would agree on the doctrine of inspiration. This doctrine teaches that God used men to write the Bible and that men like Paul used their own words under God's supervision. However, we call it the Word of God and rightfully so. For it is God's Word in every sense. Paul wrote Romans, yet God superintended each letter so that every word in its original writing was without error or flaw. *Superintended* means that the inscripturation of God's Word was by the control and guidance of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21). It was supernatural. It was a heightening of man's abilities and sensibilities.

The result is that we can say that God wrote the book of Romans and that Paul wrote the book of Romans, and both times, we would be right. Both are the single author of the book of Romans. In summary, God worked through men to write in their words to create the Bible, yet the Holy Spirit controlled every letter so that it was written exactly as God intended it to be written. Again, most Christians agree with this doctrinal statement.

The doctrine of inspiration teaches us that God works through people so that the choices they make are God's choices. What examples from the Bible do we see?

Consider the life of Joseph. His brothers sold him as a slave, and he rose to the head of the Egyptian Empire. When his father died, the brothers were fearful for their lives, but Joseph recognized that what they did they meant for evil, but it was all part of God's plan, and He meant it for good (Genesis 50:20). So, we know that God works through people to make the choices that He desires, but man still has responsibility for his choices.

Now let us carry that over to the doctrine of salvation, the sovereignty of God, and the responsibility of man. There is a good reason why God juxtaposes the content of Romans 10 immediately after the content of Romans 9: to prevent much of the debate that too many Christians spend their time arguing over.

The struggle with this doctrine is a struggle over our theological understanding and our personal experience. We have just seen that theologically, it is God and God alone who elects to show mercy on whomever He chooses. However, when you and I got saved, what did we experience? We remember someone presenting the gospel to us, and we then believed. Therefore, experientially, we remember choosing God. Therefore, the who-chooses-whom debate is really an issue of our theological understanding versus our experience. Did God choose you, or did you choose God?

Well, based on Romans 9, I think we would all say, if we are honest with the text, that God chose us. That is only the first half of the answer. However, now let us look at Romans 10.

## II. Man's Responsibility in Belief (vs. 10:8-17)

Romans 10:9-10 clearly state that if we confess and believe, we will be saved. Our salvation is based on our confession and belief. It does not matter whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. Anyone who confesses with their mouth the Lord Jesus Christ and believes in their heart that God raised Him from the dead will be saved. That sounds like we choose God. Stay with me.

We need to deal with one of the major arguments against this text. It is the view that man cannot believe in God until God regenerates the man and changes his heart to be able to believe in God. Not only does this passage teach against that view, but many do not realize that it also leads to one of two dangerous teachings. If God must regenerate a person to be able to believe, then there *must* be a time

gap between regeneration and belief. Thus, a person could be a regenerated unbeliever, and we see that nowhere in Scripture. This cannot happen even if it is for a split second. No one can be a regenerated unbeliever. However, erring on the other side of man choosing God results in having an unregenerated believer. Again, you have the same problem. There is no such thing as that in Scripture, either.

We have already discussed the doctrine of inspiration, that the Holy Spirit works through men to do what God wills, though it is completely their own wilful acts. Note that I did not say free will because no one prior to salvation has a free will. We are all influenced by sin; therefore, until salvation our will is not free. It is bound by sin. Prior to salvation we are slaves to sin. (Romans 6:15-2). Another major argument involves the neglect of one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit: His convicting work in the heart of unbelievers. The Holy Spirit convicts the unbeliever of sin and works through the person to confess Christ and believe. Just as with the doctrine of inspiration, what we see is dual actions with a single result.

So, what is the answer? Theologically, God chose you (Romans 9). Experientially, you chose God (Romans 10). **These options are two sides of the same coin!** Therefore, when we discuss the doctrine of God's sovereignty in salvation, we see that man *does* have a responsibility, and yet it is still by God's election. Regeneration and man's belief are a simultaneous work of the Holy Spirit. One does not happen without the other. God elected us outside of time and worked through us by convicting us of our sin that we would confess and believe.

Now, for those that are still confused and are convinced that they must be able to understand these two elements of salvation completely, there is one more Scripture that will completely answer this debate. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, *"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."* In other words, it is not for us to know everything about God, but that which He has revealed to us is our responsibility to teach others. God is greater than we, and His ways are not our ways; therefore, we are not expected to understand everything of God. If you cannot fully comprehend how God can elect us apart from our choosing, and yet we choose God, then that is fine. You do not have to understand it fully. Rest in the knowledge that that God has taught it, and teach it as He has revealed it to us through Paul.

### III. Your Responsibility (vs. 10:13-15)

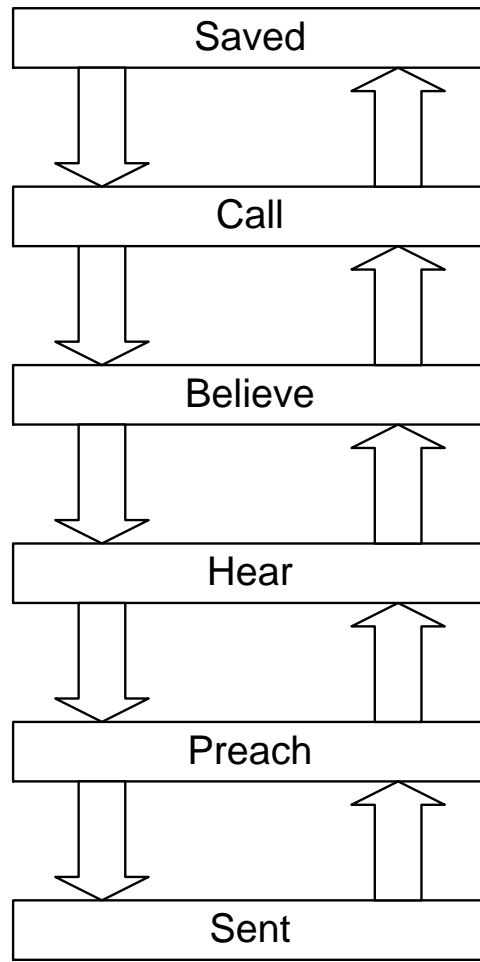
God has given us a deposit of truth in the Scriptures, and we are responsible for the dispensing of that truth as God sees fit. We are involved in missions, which is about people coming to faith. Verse 17 says that *"faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* We are responsible to study the Word of God for the hearing of those that need faith.

What is our practical responsibility as Christians? Verses 13-15 answer this question:

*"For 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?"*

It is our responsibility to go out with the Word of God to those unbelieving co-workers, family members, and friends.

Below is what I call the "missions ladder." The saved are called, and the called will believe because they hear what someone who was sent preached, and it is those who are called that are sent to preach so that others will hear and believe because they, too, were called.



## Final Thoughts

Some people feel that since God sovereignly chooses, they do not need to share the gospel with others. However, God's says, "*And how will they hear without a preacher?*" Others claim that if salvation is all of God, then they will sit back and wait for God to save them, enjoying their sinful life until then since it salvation not their choice.

To any who are not saved: God is calling you to repentance. To those who are saved: God is sending you to preach the gospel so that many will hear and some will believe because they are called and will be saved.

Therefore, we should not be wasting valuable time debating over God's sovereignty versus man's responsibility and thus dividing God's children. *Both* are taught in Scripture, and if we cannot understand how they relate together completely, that is Scripturally fine. The Great Commission we received from our Lord Jesus is to go and preach the Word of God to those who will hear and believe so that they may call upon His name. And if they call upon the name of the Lord, then they are God's elect.

Let us not fight over the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Let us unite to reach a lost and dying world in what God has revealed.