

# The Sovereignty of God in Missions

## Romans 9-10

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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 that seem controversial; like sin, God's wrath and the sovereignty of God. Many churches would rather bow to marketing techniques and the ability of man to work on the emotions of others. Too many pastors have forgotten that it is not their church, it is God's church. It is God who brings the people into the family of God and not man's creative promotion. It is for this purpose that 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 that means that man is not. We desire sovereignty for ourselves. That was why Adam fell in the Garden of Eden. That is why today men teach that we evolved from monkeys, to eliminate God and set themselves up in His place. Man wants full control over his life. The problem is so does God. The reality is that only One has the proper authority for that sovereignty and that is God. However, we keep fighting to take it. People do not like the doctrine of God's sovereignty because it means we must submit to God, not God to man.

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 following question that gets asked when discussing God's sovereignty in salvation is, what is man's responsibility or does man not have any. Many believe that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility cannot coexist. As if it must be one or the other. Are these two mutually exclusive?

I will attempt to answer and clarify thousand of years of debate, if you allow me to avoid labels and listen to my definition of terms. Please do not assume you know what I believe and put me into some theological box. Listen closely and you may just find that you will agree with me. Many debate but few listen. Please do not label me. At least, do not label me until I finish. Labels are good if all agree on the definitions of the labels. However, on this subject many do not agree on the definitions, instead many labels are used to separate the body of Christ in areas where there should really be unity. This message is attempt to bring unity to a divided Christian community, because the sovereignty of God is a doctrine that should unite Christians not divide.

### 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, this clearly fits in 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. That is Paul's main point of this passage, that individual's both Jew and Gentile can be children of the promise.

Paul is making the argument that people are not a child 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, named in the Bible (Genesis 25:2). Therefore, Isaac could not claim to be the only born son of Abraham. Yet, Isaac was not even the first-born son of Abraham. Ishmael was the first-born. Paul's argument of God's sovereignty in election 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. Therefore, God through Paul makes the point clearer. God not only choose the second son with Abraham, but also with Isaac (vs. 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 were even born God elected one and not the other. Paul make 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 states 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 this is the question many ask. Paul knows that to man this statement seems unjust. *“It’s not fair!”*, some would say.

However, Paul will prove that it is fair and 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, where He is not sovereign but we ultimately are.

## **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 everything out of nothing. It is God who made the earth. It is God who gives life. It is God who shows mercy and compassion on who 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. God formed everything out of nothing from the smallest element of an atom to the entirety of the universe. Not one piece of it is outside God’s control. If there is one 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 heart of others, like the Pharaoh of Egypt during the time of Moses. This may seem hard to understand, but if one does not understand what God through Paul is stating here, they will never properly understand God’s sovereignty. We need to start in the beginning. Due to Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden of attempting to become the sovereign of the world, humanity has fallen. This fall has cause 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 good, or at best neutral toward 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, its Hell. Therefore, it is not God’s justice that should be questioned when we discuss His election, but His mercy. That is why Paul quotes from the Old Testament to say 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. The fact that God shows mercy on anyone is the amazing thing. We should ask

how can God show mercy on sinners, not question His justice, as if He is somehow obligated to show mercy on all people.

If you have followed with me 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?’*” (v. 19).

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. That is the thought. Many people stumble over this thought. Most people end up in one of two outcomes from this passage. Either salvation is all of God and man has no responsibility or it is ultimately man’s choice and God has no responsibility. Want the answer? Wait until chapter 10. First, we must build the foundation of the argument as Paul does. No jumping to the end of the book to see “who dun nit”.

In short the answer to the questions of verse 19 are answered in verse 20. As Job had to find 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.

God’s sovereignty in salvation is because God is the creator of man and like a potter He can make the vessel for whatever purpose He has for the vessel. Many ask how can God choose to save some and not others. Somehow, people think that God is required to saved all people or none. Then again, no one seems to think that none is an option, so they say that either God must save all people or at least give each person an equal “chance” of being saved, therefore, it must be man’s choice and not God’s. So the thinking goes like this, if the choice in salvation is God’s then He must choose all people 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 show mercy.

Notice the vessels for mercy are “*prepared beforehand for glory*”, but he “*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 state 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 basis 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 what ever He wills and does not have to answer to man, angels or anything else for His decisions, because He is sovereign.

## **B. God's Sovereignty Practiced**

Do we really believe in God's sovereignty? Is God only sovereign only in salvation and the displaying of mercy? How does God's sovereignty work out in daily life? We in our flesh a desire to control, but it is God who controls. Do we submit to His sovereignty or do we fight Him for sovereignty? How does God's sovereignty look practically?

Let us look that a couple of examples. Let us start with prayer. Oh but wait, if God is sovereign then He does not need me to pray to Him and make requests. After all He is sovereign. Is that a right attitude toward God's commandments? If God is sovereign then He has the right to choose not only the results but also the means. God desires not only to display His mercy in us but also to hear from His children in prayer for the purpose of fellowship. Not that He needs us but He knows we need Him.

Another example is our tongue. How do we speak to and about one another? Do we look like children of God in our speech? How often do Christians talk about other Christians with the intent of harm, like gossip or belittling? Should we praise ourselves over God? We should seek no other purpose then to praise God in our speech.

At this point, some may say that I sound like a hyper-Calvinist. However, I like Paul, am providing salvation from God's view. The reason this issue is so difficult to understand is because people think that only one action cause a single reaction. In other words, either God's chooses or man chooses. 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 in the doctrine of inspiration. This doctrine teaches that God used men to write the Bible, that men like Paul, used their own words not dictated by God. 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 was that God wrote the book of Romans and we can also say that Paul wrote the book of Romans. Both are the single author of the book of Romans. Most Christians agree with this statement when it comes to the doctrine of inspiration. So let us summarize it. 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.

The doctrine of inspiration teaches us that God works through people so that the choices they make are God's choices. No, that cannot be you say. You need an example from the Bible. Well, turn to Genesis and look at the life of Joseph. His brothers sold him as a slave and he rises to the head of the Egyptian Empire. When his father dies, the brothers are fearful for their lives, but Joseph recognizes that what they did they meant for evil but it was all part of God's plan and He meant it for good. So, God works through people to make the choices that He desires, but it is still man's responsibility for his choices.

Now let us carry that over to the doctrine of salvation and the discussion of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. There is a good reason why God places Romans chapter 10 after Romans chapter 9. That was to prevent much of the debate that too many Christians spend their time arguing over.

You see the struggle over this doctrine is a struggle over our theological understanding and our 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 believed. Therefore, experientially we remember our choosing God. So, the debate who choose who, is really an issue of our theological understanding

versus our experience. However, they do not have to be mutually exclusive. One does not have to happen before the other. So, did God chose you or did you chose God.

Well, based on Romans chapter 9 I think we would all, if we are honest with the text, say that God chose us. However, now let us look at Romans chapter 10.

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

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

The argument is often made that "whosoever" means, WHO-SO-EVER. Anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. And the arguments begin, but what if they are not one of the elect. Whosoever means whosoever. But they cannot believe unless God first changes their heart to believe. Whosoever means whosoever. But they are enemies of God and cannot chose Him. Whosoever means whosoever. We can come up with many, many arguments, but this text is very clear, "whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved".

Now let us 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 also it leads to one of two dangerous teachings that many do not realize. If God must regenerate a person to be able to believe then you have put a time gap between regeneration and belief. You now have the problem that if someone is not saved until they believe and that person must be regenerated first then they can be regenerated and yet not be saved. Thus, you can be a regenerated unbeliever, and this cannot happen even if it is for a split second. No one can be a regenerated unbeliever. However, if you error on the other side of man choosing God, now you have an unregenerate believer. Again, you have the same problem.

So what is the answer? Well let us go back to what we said about the doctrine of inspiration. We have already seen that the Holy Spirit works through men to do what God wills, though it is completely their own willful acts. Note 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.

Many also neglect 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 in Christ and believe. It is the same dual actors as in the doctrine of inspiration with a single result. Theologically God chose you. Experiencurally you chose God. Both are taught one in Romans chapter 9 and the other in Romans chapter 10.

Therefore, when we discuss the doctrine of God's Sovereignty in salvation we see that man does have a responsibility and yet it is 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 outside of time and worked through us, by convicting of our sin that we would confess and believe.

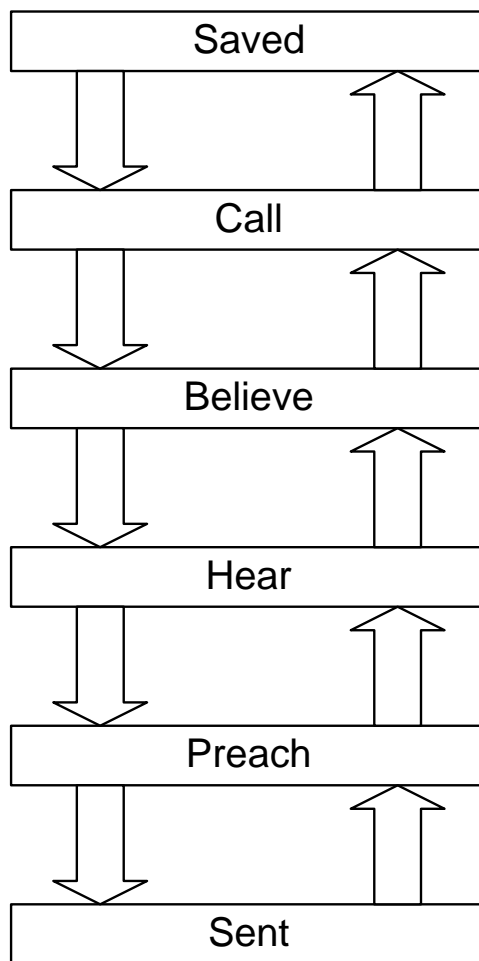
Now for those that are still confused and are convinced that they must be able to understand these two elements of salvation completely, there is one more Scripture that will completely answer this debate. It is Deuteronomy 29:29. It says, "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things 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 we have a responsibility to teach others. God is greater then us 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, know 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 want to be involved in missions and that is about people coming to faith. Well verse 17 says, *“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.

So what is our responsibility as Christians? God has already shown His mercy on us and we believe in Him. Now what? Verses 13-15 answer this question. We read: *“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 unbelievers that we work with, live with, hang out with or are in our families.

This is what I call the “missions ladder”. The saved are called and the called will believe because they hear what someone preached because they were sent and it is those are called that are sent to preach so that others will hear and believe because they too were called.



Therefore, we should not be wasting valuable time debating over God’s sovereignty versus man’s responsibility dividing the God’s children. Both are taught and if we cannot understand how they related together completely, fine. Our responsibility as Christians is to go and preach the Word of God to those who will hear and believe so that they may call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you know what, if then call upon the name of the Lord, then you know that they are God’s elect.

## Conclusion

Some people feel that since God is sovereign and He chooses they do not need to share the gospel with others. However, God's says, "*how will they hear without a preacher?*". Others state that if it is all of God then they will sit back and wait for God to save them, but until then they will enjoy their sinful life, since it is 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 called and will be saved. Let us not fight of the doctrine of God's sovereignty, but unite around what God has revealed to reach a lost and dying world.