

Commentary on Romans 9: God's Election

Chapter 9 of the epistle that the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans contains many truths pointing to the depth of God's wisdom, and it has also been a reason for a debate among some believers concerning one of the main topics it deals with – the election and God's will. The story of Jacob and Esau is also mentioned there in the core of this chapter as an introduction to the main topic, which is God's election and will.

¹⁰ And not only *this*, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, *even by* our father Isaac ¹¹ (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), ¹² it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." ¹³ As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." (**Romans 9:10-13**)

We see God's election illustrated in some verses of Romans 9. We also see Pharaoh's situation in v. 17 and v. 18.

"For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens." (**Romans 9:17-18**)

This passage says that God has mercy on whom He wills and whom He wills, He hardens. This statement has always sparked debates, but at the same time, it exalts His authority. It tells us that the grace belongs to Him, and it depends on Him who will receive it. This fact should bring

us more respect and fear when we approach Him, pleading Him for grace and mercy. Esau and Pharaoh are placed in this chapter as examples of persons who were hardened. We need to see as well what kind of persons Esau and Pharaoh were. We have to admit, anyway, that there will always be some mystery about the election of God, but we know that if He hardens someone's heart or softens it, it is always with a purpose. **Romans 9:18** states: “He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills hardens.” We all know that God’s mercy is above all, and most of the decisions He takes based on mercy are without explanation, and we are not meant to know certain things at the present time; we will probably know some of them one day. Still, there could be a reason in part for the fact that God “wills” certain things to happen. When someone wants or wills something, it is with a reason and a purpose. God doesn’t perform His will blindly.

“To believe,” or in other words, to have a softened heart, is always His work. In the same way, to have a hard heart is because He didn’t soften it, and He can harden it even more in certain cases. The work of faith in someone’s heart is His gift. We still have to be very careful when we give an answer to someone of the type, “If you don’t believe it is because God hasn’t softened your heart, and He has to choose you first”, even though it is true. This way, we provide the person with an answer on how this will be accomplished in the end, but we don’t give them guidance on how it will unfold until then. In the same way, we need to be careful when telling someone they need to perform certain works in order to believe or be chosen.

The most accurate and true example we have is that of the Apostles in the Bible. When preaching the gospel in the beginning, they certainly didn't tell people that they needed to perform works to be saved or save themselves in any other way, but they still showed them the way and the attitude to follow. They told them that faith and repentance

are necessary. They presented the gospel to them the way God wanted and were led by the Spirit.

The sense of telling someone that God is the one who chooses people and grants salvation is that they become aware that only He can help them, and it depends on Him. He grants something to someone whenever He wants, the way He wants, and according to His measure. The persons need to know that God is sovereign, that He is above all. It doesn't depend on me, but on Him. It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but we can rather say, "teach me, Lord, how to run, because I don't know the right way." This is the way and the purpose we need to point out to those who inquire about the topic.

We also need to see to whom God has hardened the heart. We speak of Pharaoh, who has already started on the wrong track, not heeding Moses' warnings from the beginning. Then, at the end, God has hardened His heart. I believe that, from the fifth plague onward, it says that God has hardened his heart. At the end of each one of the first four, it is said that Pharaoh hardened his heart. The fact is that he already had his chances, but didn't accept them.

If we look more closely at Esau's story, the other character mentioned in Romans 9, we see that he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew ([Genesis 25:29-34](#)). In this way, he despised it. We see that He never gave the right value to what was given to him by God. Further on, as the story unfolds, Jacob stole his blessing by disguising himself as him and, in this way, deceiving his father, Isaac ([Genesis 27:1-40](#)). Someone might say that it was unjust, and it was, but God, in a way, allowed it as Esau had already despised his birthright. He didn't have the right attitude. Still, God worked in Jacob's life and dealt with his issue and what he had done by deceiving his brother afterward, and he also had to face the consequences of it. He was also deceived by his

uncle Laban, and there was a moment in which he had to wrestle with God the whole night to obtain His blessing ([Genesis 32:22-30](#)).

Why did he do it, if his father had blessed him already? I guess because, by the way he achieved it before, he didn't have a personal conviction about it. We can say that what had happened was more about confirming that Esau didn't want his birthright and despised it, not primarily about what Jacob had to receive. What he received was confirmed later when he wrestled with God, and that was when he had a personal experience with Him and was convicted about it. Till then, he wasn't satisfied, and he didn't want to conform to what he already had. He wanted more. He desired it. This is the way in which he was giving value to what comes from God.

Did God already know their hearts and the attitude they would have beforehand? This part of God's knowledge is a mystery to us.

He is a God and He knew it, but the way and the purpose for which He works is a mystery to us. We don't know the process and the outcome of the way He works. Most of the time, we don't know it for our lives or the lives of other people. We usually know very little. We are still accountable for that. One thing is certain – Jacob and Esau were not the same person. We know that God's election is involved here, but they had different attitudes toward God's Kingdom. This fact implies that there is also an attitude in the heart that probably stays behind the hardening of someone. We can also notice that sometimes the most hardened people are those who, after being given more opportunities, have rejected them. These are also the people who have been listening to the gospel their entire lives without accepting it. That obviously shouldn't discourage us from still giving them the good news, because, as we said, we don't know the way God works or the outcome of His work. A person can believe in the gospel when we least expect it. God

knows how the bones form in the mother's womb; we don't see it (**Ecclesiastes 11:5**). In the same way, He knows the way He works in someone's life to lead them to Him. We just need to obey Him when proclaiming the gospel.

Often, we think of receiving because we ask or do a lot, but how are we going to receive if we keep asking or doing things our own way?

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it in your pleasures." (**James 4:3**)

If I know, for example, that I am really hungry and I have no money to buy bread, and I go to the baker knowing that it depends entirely on him to give it to me or not—meaning that I have no right to have it, as I can't buy it—then wouldn't I plead with him respectfully to give it to me? In the same way, we need to come to God with profound respect, fear, and supplication, knowing that it depends on Him to show us grace. We need to ask according to His way. We need to submit to His will.

*"So then *it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.*"* (**Romans 9:16**)

There is nothing wrong with willing or running, but as we said before, we must examine the purpose and the intention with which we ask or will something. The Bible also tells us to ask with perseverance. Jesus also told His disciples about the parable of the persistent widow (**Luke 18:1-8**). Sometimes we keep on asking, but we don't find an answer. Nevertheless, we still need to carry on. It is a process, and during this process, God moulds our hearts. Sometimes God's silence changes our hearts. During this silence, we learn that something is not right with us and that we need to change. Our heart finds its way to God. It starts parrying and asking with more faith, sincerity, and desire.

Another example that we see here in chapter 9, and one of the reasons for which it was written, is the nation of Israel.

³⁰ What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; ³¹ but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. ³² Why? Because *they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.* ³³ As it is written:

“Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense,
And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” (Romans 9:30-33)

We see that they were not seeking righteousness in the right way —by faith and humility—but were seeking their own righteousness, leading to a pride that is unbearable in the eyes of the Lord. He is not pleased with any possible way a person draws to Him. He cannot simply accept anything coming to Him. This is His nature. Doing the opposite is against Him. He cannot accept sin, because He is holy. The reason Jesus was interacting with sinful people and was called a friend of sinners was because of the sacrifice He was going to make. Believing in that sacrifice makes a person acceptable before God. That’s why He didn’t rebuke sinners and separate Himself from them, but drew close to them to invite them to repentance. He strongly rebuked people who esteemed themselves as righteous, such as the Pharisees, because they, also being sinners, didn’t want to acknowledge their need for repentance. Jesus came to die so that people could have an open way to God—people who repent and acknowledge their need. Pride doesn’t let us acknowledge our need. It is not part of God’s way. That’s why He

cannot bear a person's pride, and He works in their life to prevent it. The work of faith is humble; it is made by Him who came as a man to suffer and die for us. What greater example than this can we have?

“For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, **and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.**” (**Romans 10:2-3**, emphasis added)

Here we see that the matter is not only about the zeal and desire we might have for God, but what is our attitude and the way we desire God. We need to be aware of something. In the Word is written that He will not despise a **broken and a contrite heart** (**Psalms 51:17**). Often, this must be our condition so we can receive something. The truth is that most men do not let this happen to them. We do not permit God to complete His work in us and to bring us into that condition. We prefer to feel strong, and we do not allow His light to reveal our true condition. Only when He works in us can our hearts be broken and accepted by Him. He uses His Holy Spirit to work in us for this purpose.

What the nation of Israel was doing was establishing its own righteousness. They believed this was the right way because it also elevated their own abilities. What they didn't do was to submit themselves to God's righteousness. In this chapter of Romans, we also see ourselves compared to clay and Him being the potter (**Romans 9:21**). If He is the potter, then we need to let ourselves be moulded by Him. That is the only way.

“Ask me anything, Lord, but not about this thing.” Often, this is the response and the attitude we have when He wants to mould us. How hard it is sometimes for us to abandon ourselves in His hands, leaving our own strength, understanding, or ego aside! It means that we

submit ourselves to Him and leave all that actually disturbs us at times. Only in this way, with a broken heart, can we enter and be accepted by Him. This explains why certain people need to come to their limits, so they can surrender in the arms of the Lord and open their hearts to Him.

By all of this, we perceive that what is important is His way and will. This is how He can work in our lives. If I, for example, want to prepare something according to a certain recipe and there is written down a particular ingredient or way to prepare something, but I still insist that I know better and I do it as I think it's better, then obviously most of the time it's not going to come out as it is supposed to, right? This is only an example that, of course, we cannot compare with God's Kingdom, but we can make an idea out of it.

Once, at the question of someone saying: "How can I seek God, so that He can answer me?" I told him: "Seek God, but know that **He is the One who gives.**" Only He gives, and this is not just because we look for Him in any possible way. We have to know, however, that it is important to seek Him, because the word says so, but we need to know that He gives in the time and the way He desires. We mustn't think that it all happened for the fact that we looked for Him. Even if that happened, there is a lot of His work to bring us to that point. It is because of mercy. What is also important is that until we haven't found or received something from Him, we mustn't behave as if we already have.

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