

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Is There Injustice With God?

by Dan Trygg

“What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses, ‘I will mercy whomever I do mercy, and I will compassion whomever I do compassion.’ ¹⁶ So, then it is not of the one willing nor the one running, but of God, the One showing mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I raised you up, so that I might demonstrate My power in you, and so that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.’ ¹⁸ So then, He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’ ²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” Romans 9:14-20a

We began our study of Romans 9-11 by saying that **we must be careful not to read things into this passage that are not specifically stated here.** Many people would make this about God choosing and calling certain people to come to salvation, and choosing others to be rejected and lost. If you accept this as the setting of what Paul is talking about, then the surface language can sound supportive of this teaching, ...especially if you also accept the specialized definitions that such teachers give to some of the words in this, and other similar passages. However, as I mentioned last time, I believe this is a totally misguided approach to this passage of Scripture. ***The preponderance of God’s appeal to humankind strongly indicates that we are creatures He has endowed with freedom of choice. HE is not threatened by this, ...nor does it take anything away from His greatness, His glory or His power. HE is the one who decided to give us the capability to think and make decisions. These choices are real, with definite consequences that follow our decisions. If 99.5% of God’s interactions with humankind seem to reference and appeal to this freedom, then why should we suppose that Paul is here saying that this is all a mirage, ...that we are mere puppets at the whim of God’s choice for us, and that we have no real choices of our own?*** God clearly tells us that “He wants *all people* to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), and “He is not willing (desiring, or purposing) for *any* to perish, but that *all* should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). If that is true, then how can we suppose that, here, Paul is telling us that God is choosing to keep some people *from* salvation, ...or that He is choosing only *some* to be saved, but choosing to reject *others*? **A fundamental principle of interpretation, whether of Biblical texts or any other literature, is that you must interpret difficult passages in light of clear passages, and assume that the author is not going to be contradicting himself.** If there is another way of looking at a passage, that is consistent with what the author plainly tells us elsewhere, then ***we should go with the explanation that is best fits with his clearly stated beliefs.***

I mentioned last time that, instead of describing God’s choosing individuals to salvation, Paul is arguing that **God made sovereign choices about which line of descendants to use to bring about His purpose**, the coming of the promised Messiah into the world. **His entire point was that not everyone descended from Abraham was a child of promise, ...not everyone descended from Isaac would inherit the covenant, ...and not everyone who was physically descended from Israel was a child of promise.** God made sovereign decisions about which person to work through, even before they had been born, ...or had done anything good or bad. **It was not about their works. It was about God’s purpose coming to pass.** He gets to decide how and when to bring His plan to fruition. **He purposely defied the expectation of the human culture of that day, and chose to work through a younger son, instead of the firstborn.**

This brings us to today’s study. In Romans 9:14, Paul anticipates an objection: “What shall we say, then?” (This is the *sixth* time this phrase occurs in this book – cf. 3:5; 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31.) ***“There is not injustice with God, is there?”*** The word for “injustice” could also mean “unfairness, inequity”. ***Is God UNFAIR to pick one over another to bring about His plan?*** Paul gives a strong and resounding answer, “May it never be!”

Why? Paul appeals to what God said to Moses in Exodus 33:19, “*I will mercy whomever I mercy; and I will pity whomever I pity.*” The question here is, “**What is God trying to communicate to Moses?**” Is it that He is a capricious God, a God who simply does what He pleases at a whim with the lives of His people? Or, is it that He is a faithful, covenant-keeping God, One who will stand behind His commitments, His promises and His purposes? Is He saying, here, “I will mercy whoever I want to”, or is He saying, “I will *continue to show mercy* on those who have My mercy, and I will *continue to have compassion and pity* on those who I am showing compassion and pity”? If you look at the larger context of the book of Exodus, it is clearly the latter message that is the lesson being taught. **God is a covenant-keeping God, ...a God who can be counted on to remember His promises and show compassion on the lineage of those He has made a covenant with in the past.** In Exodus 1, God protected the midwives from the wrath of Pharaoh, because they feared God and refused to kill the Hebrew boys as Pharaoh commanded. In Exodus 2:23-25, God heard the groans and cries of the Hebrew slaves, and took notice of them. He remembered His covenant with

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In chapter 3, this becomes the basis for His call to Moses (vss. 7-10). Notice that God calls them “My people, the sons of Israel”? **He identifies Himself as “Yahweh, the God of your fathers”. Yahweh is a form of the verb, “I am”, meaning “He is” or “He will be”. The implication is that He is the unchanging, faithful God.** He told Moses, “This is My name forever, and **this is My Memorial-Name (My title, My reknown, My ‘claim-to-fame’) to all generations**” (Ex. 3:14,15). Chapter 6:1-8 further clarify God’s self-revelation. He said, “I am Yahweh; and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by My name, Yahweh, I did not make Myself known to them. I also established a covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan... I have heard the groaning, ...and I have remembered My covenant. ...therefore, I will bring you out..., I will deliver you..., I will redeem you, ...I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you will know that I am Yahweh your God... And I will bring you to the land I promised, ...and I will give it to you as a possession; I am Yahweh.” **Does this sound like a capricious, “I’m going to do what I want to whomever I want, any time I want” kind of God, ...or does this sound like “I am a faithful, covenant-keeping God who is working out My promises which I made with people in the past, fulfilling My larger purposes”?** Can you see how *this* background understanding answers the objection Paul anticipated? **Of course, there is no injustice with God! His very nature is one of faithful consistency!**

“So, then, it is not of the one willing nor the one running, rather of the One-showing-mercy-God” (vs. 16). How are we to understand this verse? The first two words are strong logical conclusion words. “Consequently, wherefore” would be a better, more consistent translation. Paul is going back to the previous argument, before the anticipated objection in verse 14. **God’s purpose according to His choice is His prerogative. Your desire, your self-discipline will not bring about a different outcome.** Your personal faith, your personal desire and obedience *will affect* your own personal destiny, but that is not what Paul is dealing with in this passage. If you were an Ishmaelite, or a descendant of Esau, there would be nothing you could do to change the choice of God regarding His purpose to bring the Messiah through a different branch of the family, ...through the sons of Israel. **God determined that, and He has been faithful to work His covenant out in history, ...even when the children of Israel were not faithful to Him!**

For if God could tell Pharaoh that He raised *him up* (lit., “caused-him-to-stand”) to demonstrate His power and to thoroughly proclaim His name in all the earth, **could He not also do the same with unbelieving Israel?** Once again, in order to understand the references Paul makes, we need to go back and read the entire story. The quote in Romans 9 regarding Pharaoh is from Exodus 9:15,16. **In the interaction between Pharaoh and God, there are ten times where it is said that Pharaoh “hardened” or “made-strong” his own heart** (7:13,14,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7,34,35; 13:15), and ten times where God is said to do so (4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8,17). On seven occasions, Pharaoh had already resisted God by “hardening his own heart” against Him. **This is the first occasion where God finally actually does “harden” or “make strong” Pharaoh’s heart-determination to resist God. Why? So that God could more fully demonstrate His power and clearly reveal who He is.** God actually propped Pharaoh up, when he otherwise would have caved-in under the pressure, so that God could be more clearly seen. **Even the Egyptians would come to know Yahweh was God** (14:4). “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” (9:18).

Paul anticipates another objection in vs. 19: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’” His response? “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” – vs. 20. He uses some examples and rhetorical questions to help us see that **THIS IS NONE OF OUR BUSINESS!**

First, the thing molded will not say to the one forming it, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? – vs. 20.

Secondly, does not the potter have a right over the clay to make what he wants? Can he not choose to make, from the same lump one piece of pottery for honorable use, and another piece of pottery for common use? – vs. 21.

Third, **WHAT IF GOD**, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make known His power (like He did with Pharaoh), bore in much patience vessels of wrath having-been-fitted (or even, ‘having-fitted-themselves’) for destruction? – vs. 22 (Note that it does *not* say that God fitted or prepared them for destruction. The form is either a passive participle “having-been-fitted”, but undefined as to who is responsible, ...or it could be a middle participle “having fitted themselves”. This latter translation fits comfortably with the larger emphasis of Scripture on free choices with real consequences.)

And, **WHAT IF** He did this in order to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy which He prepared-beforehand unto glory, ...whom also He invited, ...US, ...not only out-from Jews but also out-from the other-nations? – vs. 23.

These rhetorical questions closely follow the history of God’s dealings with people through history. Even within the chosen family lineage of the Christ, many people were unfaithful, choosing to live for self instead of God. Nevertheless, **God patiently bore with sinners in order to accomplish a greater purpose, to bring Christ into the world**, and, through Him to make available to us the riches of His glory for those who will respond in faith and obedience to the offer of God to us. Not all those who were physically descended from *any* of these family lines were automatically children of promise. God’s word and commitment have not failed, ...but not all respond to His offer.