

Early Church Fathers on the Freedom of the Will and Romans 9

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The early church preachers, apologists, and pastoral leaders consistently spoke about the condition of man's will. The liberty of the will was always affirmed, even as a foundational truth of anthropology in catechisms for new Christians¹. How then did they address Romans 9, which some moderns insist rejects libertarian freedom?

To answer this question, I will first briefly survey the environment of philosophy in which the early church developed. Then I will present writings from John Chrysostom, Origen, Ambrosiaster, and Irenaeus which specifically address Romans 9. In consensus, they affirm an essentially libertarian view of the will which is at odds with Calvinism (Irenaeus specifically says that an interpretation of Romans 9 which makes God the arbitrary hardener of Pharaoh's heart is a view held by heretics). This should not be surprising, since even Reformed church historians generally admit that no one held Calvinist views until Augustine "rediscovered" the essential truth (!) of unconditional election in circa 400AD.

THE HISTORICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

Before plunging into the actual texts written by the early church leaders and apologists, it's important to note that the early church had to interact with numerous philosophical models of free will and determinism within Greco-Roman culture. There was no monolithic "pagan view." Indeed, there wasn't even a monolithic Jewish view! Any person asserting that early Christians were led astray from the clarity of Calvinist proof texts because they were blinded by "pagan philosophy" shows that they are ignorant of this era and the writings of the early church. The early Christians were united in their philosophy, which was a unique perspective among dozens of competing paradigms. Consider the Jews, as described by Josephus:

Now at this time there were three schools of thought among the Jews, which held different opinions concerning human affairs; the first being that of the Pharisees, the second that of the Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes. As for the Pharisees, they say that certain events are the work of Fate, but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves whether they shall take place or not. The sect of Essenes, however, declares that Fate is mistress of all things, and that nothing befalls men unless it be in accordance with her decree. But the Sadducees do away with Fate, holding that there is no such thing and that human actions are not achieved in accordance with her decree, but that all things lie within our own power, so that we ourselves are responsible for our well being, while we suffer misfortune through our own thoughtlessness.

Notably, the Jews - obviously a monotheistic group - referred to various forms of theistic determinism as conforming to or rejecting the concept they chose to call "Fate," which is clearly shorthand for divine determinism. Within this context, we also see Christian philosophical works such as Hippolytus' "Refutation of all Heresies," (circa ~220AD) in which he assesses dozens of different philosophical views ranging from Plato to Marcion. He contrasts these with a Christian view of the world.

Hippolytus, "Refutation of All Heresies"

¹ See, for instance, Cyril of Jerusalem's Catechetical Lectures, Lecture 4, section 18-21.

Book one and Book five prefaces: We propose to furnish an account of the tenets of natural philosophers, and who these are, as well as the tenets of moral philosophers, and who these are; and thirdly, the tenets of logicians, and who these logicians are. Among natural philosophers may be enumerated Thales, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Archelaus, Parmenides, Leucippus, Democritus, Xenophanes, Ecphantus, Hippo. Among moral philosophers are Socrates, pupil of Archelaus the physicist, (and) Plato the pupil of Socrates. This (speculator) combined three systems of philosophy. Among logicians is Aristotle, pupil of Plato. He systematized the art of dialectics. Among the Stoic (logicians) were Chrysippus (and) Zeno. Epicurus, however, advanced an opinion almost contrary to all philosophers. Pyrrho was an Academic; this (speculator) taught the incomprehensibility of everything. The Brahmins among the Indians, and the Druids among the Celts, and Hesiod (devoted themselves to philosophic pursuits)... What the assertions are of the Naasseni, who style themselves Gnostics, and that they advance those opinions which the Philosophers of the Greeks previously propounded, as well as those who have handed down mystical (rites), from (both of) whom the Naasseni taking occasion, have constructed their heresies... What the opinions are that are attempted (to be established) by Simon, and that his doctrine derives its force from the (lucubrations) of magicians and poets... [various other heresies].. . What the customs of the Jews are, and how many diversities of opinion there are (among them).

The early Christians certainly had dozens of philosophies to contend with! After enumerating and discussing in depth each one of these philosophies (and many others) he finally ends with an exposition of the Christian faith. I will quote primarily the relevant portions pertaining to our subject:

Book 10, Preface: The truth has not taken its principles from the wisdom of the Greeks, nor borrowed its doctrines, as secret mysteries, from the tenets of the Egyptian...Chaldeans... [or] Babylonians.

Chapter 28. The Doctrine of the Truth. The first and only (one God), both Creator and Lord of all, had nothing coeval with Himself.... By an exercise of His will He created things that are, which beforehand had no existence, except that He willed to make them. For He is fully acquainted with whatever is about to take place, for foreknowledge also is present to Him. The different principles, however, of what will come into existence, He first fabricated, viz., fire and spirit, water and earth, from which diverse elements He proceeded to form His own creation...

Chapter 29. The Doctrine of the Truth Continued. ...when, according as He willed, He also formed (objects), He called them by names, and thus notified His creative effort. And making these, He formed the ruler of all, and fashioned him out of all composite substances. The Creator did not wish to make him a god, and failed in His aim; nor an angel—be not deceived,— but a man. For if He had willed to make you a god, He could have done so. [A discussion of theosis follows].

...Now the world was made from nothing; wherefore it is not God; as also because this world admits of dissolution whenever the Creator so wishes it. But God, who created it, did not, nor does not, make evil. He makes what is glorious and excellent; for He who makes it is good. Now man, that was brought into existence, was a creature endowed with a capacity of self-determination, yet not possessing a sovereign intellect, nor holding sway over all things by reflection, and authority, and power, but a slave to his passions, and comprising all sorts of contrarities in himself. But man, from the fact of his possessing a capacity of self-determination, brings forth what is evil, that is, incidentally; and this evil is not consummated unless you actually commit some piece of wickedness. For it is in regard of our desiring anything that is wicked, or our meditating upon it, that what is evil is so denominated. Evil had no existence from the beginning, but came into being subsequently. Since

man has free will, a law has been defined for his guidance by the Deity, not without answering a good purpose. For if man did not possess the power to will and not to will, why should a law be established? For a law will not be laid down for an animal devoid of reason, but a bridle and a whip; whereas to man has been given a precept and penalty to perform, or for not carrying into execution what has been enjoined. ...

... Such is our faith, O all you men,— ours, I say, who are not persuaded by empty expressions, nor caught away by sudden impulses of the heart, nor beguiled by the plausibility of eloquent discourses, yet who do not refuse to obey words that have been uttered by divine power. And these injunctions has God given to the Word. But the Word, by declaring them, promulgated the divine commandments, thereby turning man from disobedience, not bringing him into servitude by force of necessity, but summoning him to liberty through a choice involving spontaneity.

INTRODUCTION TO CHRYSOSTOM AND ORIGEN'S COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 9

Next, we will look at Chrysostom and Origen. They approach Romans 9 from slightly different angles: Origen tends toward theological speculation and philosophical diversions, and Chrysostom tends to be more exegetical and pastoral. Nevertheless, they both have a clear consensus in the following matters:

Paul is contending with an opponent - a hostile inquisitor who insists his Jewish heritage is a sufficient claim upon God's blessing.

Therefore, Paul is not about to provide a clear answer until he leaves his opponent speechless, confused, and thus receptive to the answer. This is the point of Romans 9:15 – 9:23.

The clearest answer is to be found in Romans 9:30 – 10:4, and not in the preceding portions designed primarily to confuse and silence the hostile inquisitor.

While God is most certainly the Potter, people are ultimately their own cause of being formed into a vessel for wrath, of their own libertarian free will. If a person chooses to flee from God, this will result in God shaping them into a vessel of condemnation. God would prefer that they repent rather perish.

The gift and potential of faith toward God is universal – everyone can submit to the grace and goodness of God or can resist Him. Some freely choose to yield to Him, and some freely choose to resist Him. There is no compulsion from God, but only a good will toward all.

God's Election is based on foreseen qualities – God “will render to every man according to His deeds” (Romans 2:6) – those who yield to Him in humility (while not deserving His grace) He grants fellowship with Himself; those who resist Him, He condemns. Election is not arbitrary. “Called according to purpose” (note that in Greek there is no pronoun such as "His") can refer to two things at the same time: God's purposeful decision to call those whom He foreknew would come, because they freely chose to have the purpose in their heart to respond to Him.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (circa 347–407)

John Chrysostom preached verse by verse through numerous books of the Bible – and his native language was Greek. A massive amount of his writings has come down to us. He is one of the most esteemed preachers of the church. Even in his own day, he preached to packed audiences: warning, convicting and encouraging their hearts with Scripture. As a Christian, Chrysostom of course was an ardent supporter of salvation through grace. It is common to stumble across gems from him such as, *“Even if we stand at the very summit of virtue, it is by mercy that we shall be saved.”*

In Chrysostom’s Commentary on Matthew, he writes on the freedom of man’s will:

*But when He said, “It must needs be,” it is not as taking away the power of choosing for themselves, nor the freedom of the moral principle, nor as placing man’s life under any absolute constraint of circumstances, that He says these things, but He foretells what would surely be; and this Luke has set forth in another form of expression, “It is impossible but that offenses should come.” But what are the offenses? The hindrances on the right way. Thus also those on the stage call those who are skilled in these matters, the contortionists who distort their bodies. It is not then His prediction that brings the offenses; far from it; neither because He foretold it, therefore doth it take place; but because it surely was to be, therefore He foretold it; since if those who bring in the offenses had not been minded to do wickedly, neither would the offenses have come; and if they had not been to come, neither would they have been foretold. But because those men did evil, and were incurably diseased, the offenses came, and He foretells that which is to be.*²

In his commentary on Romans, Chrysostom wrote the following extensive treatment of Romans 9. This is only some of the most relevant portions:

Chrysostom on Romans 9

Ver. 11-13. For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calls, it was said unto her, the elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.

What then was the cause of why one was loved and the other hated?... With what intent then did God say this? Because He does not wait, as man does, to see from the issue of their acts the good and him who is not so, but even before these He knows which is the wicked and which not such...

Ver. 15. For I will have mercy, He says, on whom I will have mercy, and I will show compassion on whom I will show compassion. Exodus 33:19

... Was [Pharaoh] alone such [a hardened sinner], and not even one other person? How then did he come to be so severely punished? ...[likewise], why not count all worthy of equal honor? ...why is it to be only a remnant [of Israelites]? You see what difficulty he has filled the subject with. And with great propriety! For when you have power to throw your adversary into perplexity, do not at once bring forward your answer, because if he himself is found to be as ignorant as he tries to make you seem, why take upon yourself unnecessary hazards? Why make him more bold, by drawing everything upon yourself [and only answering his questions]? *“Now tell me, O thou Jew, that hast so many perplexing questions, and are unable to answer any of them, how do you*

² (Homilies # 59 on Matthew 18:7).

come to annoy us on account of the call of the Gentiles? I, however, have a good reason to give you why the Gentiles were justified and you were cast out. And what is the reason? It is that they are of faith, you of the works of the Law. And it is owing to this obstinacy of yours that you have in every way been given up. For, they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.” (Romans 10:3)

The clearing up then of the whole passage, to sum up the entirety, is brought out here by that blessed person. But that this may be more clear, let us investigate the things he says also one by one. We will do this with the knowledge that what the blessed Paul aimed at was to show - by everything he said - that only God knows who are worthy. No man whatsoever knows who is worthy even if he seem to know ever so well, but that in man's judgement there are many errors. For He that knows the secrets of the hearts, only He knows for a certainty who deserve a crown, and who deserve punishment and vengeance. Hence it is that many of those who are esteemed good by men, God convicts and punishes, and those suspected to be bad God crowns, after showing it not to be so. Thus God forms His sentence not after the judgment of us slaves, but after His own keen and uncorrupt decision. And God does not need to wait for the performance of actions to look at who is wicked and who is not wicked.

But, so that we do not make the subject more obscure, let us go again to the very words of the Apostle.

Ver. 10. And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one.

...And he shows that noble birth after the flesh is of no avail, but we must seek for virtue of soul, which even before the works of it God knows of. For the children, he says, being not yet born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, it was said unto her that the elder shall serve the younger: for this was a sign of foreknowledge, that they were chosen from the very birth. So that the election made according to foreknowledge, might be obviously from God, from the very first day He at once saw and proclaimed which was good and which not. He means this: Do not then tell me that you have read the Law and the Prophets, and have been a servant for such a long time - for He that knows how to assay the soul, knows which is worthy of being saved. Yield then to the incomprehensibility of the election. For it is God alone Who knows how to crown aright. How many, for instance, seemed better than St. Matthew - to go by the exhibition of works then visible. But He who knows things undeclared, and is able to assay the mind's aptitude, knew the pearl though lying in the mire, and after passing by others, and being well pleased with the beauty of this, He elected it, and by adding to the noble born free-will grace from Himself, He made it approved. ...the God that loves man, the infinite Wisdom, Who alone has a clear knowledge of all things, will not allow of man's guesses to form His sentence, but will out of His own exact and unfailing Wisdom pass his sentence upon all men. Hence it was that He chose the publican, the thief, and the harlot; but dishonored priests, and elders, and rulers, and cast them out. And this one may see happening in the martyrs' case also. Many accordingly of those who were utterly cast aside, have in the time of trial been crowned. And, on the other hand, some that have been held by many to be great people, have stumbled and fallen. Do not then call the Creator to account, nor say, "Why is it that one was crowned and another punished?" For He knows how to do these things with exactness. Whence also he says, Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated. That it was with justice, you indeed know from the result: but He knew it clearly even before the result. For it is not a mere exhibition of works that God searches after, but a nobleness of choice and an obedient temper (γνώμην εὐγνώμονα) besides. For a man of this kind, if he should ever sin through some surprise, will speedily recover himself. And if he should even stay long haply in a state of vice, he will not be overlooked, but God Who knows all things will speedily draw him out. And so he that is herein corrupted, even if he seem to do some good things, will perish, in that he does this with an ill intention. Hence even David, after committing murder and adultery, since he did this as being carried away by surprise, and not from habitual practice of wickedness, speedily washed it out. The Pharisee, however, who had not perpetrated any such crime (Luke 18:11), but even had good deeds besides to boast of, lost all by the bad spirit he had chosen.

Ver. 14. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.

Hence there is no such thing in the case of us and the Jews. And then he goes on with another thing, a thing more clear than this. And of what sort is it?

Ver. 15. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

...For it is not yours to know, O Moses, he means, which are deserving of My love toward man, but leave this to Me. But if Moses had no right to know, much less have we. And this is why he did not merely quote the passage, but also called to our minds to whom it was said. For it is Moses, he means, that he is speaking to, that at least by the dignity of the person he might make the objector modest.

...Ver. 16, 17. So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy. For the Scripture says unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.

As then in the one case, he means, some were saved and some were punished, so here also. This man was reserved for this very purpose. And then he again urges the objection.

Ver. 18, 19. Therefore He has mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardens. You will say then unto me, Why does he then find fault? For who has resisted His will?

See what pains he takes to embarrass the subject in every way. And he does not produce the answer immediately, since it is useful to not do so yet, but he first stops the disputant's mouth. He does this by saying:

Ver. 20. Nay but, O man, who are you that repliest against God?

This he does to take down the objector's unseasonable inquisitiveness, and excessive curiosity, and to put a check upon it, and teach him to know what God is, and what man is, and how incomprehensible His foreknowledge is, and how far above our reason, and how obedience to Him in all points is binding. So when he has made this preparatory step in his hearer, and has hushed and softened down his spirit, finally with great skill he introduces the answer since he has made what he says easier to be received. And he does not say, "It is impossible to answer questions of this kind," No, but what does he say? That it is presumptuous to raise such questions. For our business is to obey what God does, not to be curious even if we do not know the reason why He does them. Therefore he said, "Who are you that repliest against God?" You see how he makes vt by tery light of him, how he presses down his arrogant spirit! "Who are you? are you a sharer of His power? Nay, are you sitting in judgment upon God? Why, in comparison with Him you cannot even have existence!" And not even this or that sort of existence, but absolutely none at all! For the expression, "Who are you?" set him at much more at naught than "You are nothing." And he takes other ways of showing further his indignation in the question, and does not say, "Who are you that answerest God?" but, "that repliest against," that is, gainsaying, and opposing. For saying "things ought to be like this," and "things ought not to be like this," is what a man does when he "replies against." See how Paul scares them, how he terrifies them, how he makes them tremble rather than be questioning and curious. This is what an excellent teacher does; he does not follow his disciples' fancy everywhere, but leads them to his own mind, and pulls up the thorns, and then puts the seed in, and does not answer at once in all cases to the questions put to him.

Ver. 20, 21. Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why have You made me thus? Hath not the potter power, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?

Here it is not to do away with free-will that he says this, but to show, up to what point we ought to obey God. For in respect of calling God to account, we ought to be as little disposed to it as the clay is. For we ought to

abstain not only from gainsaying or questioning, but even from speaking or thinking of it at all, and to become like that lifeless clay which follows the potter's hands and lets itself be drawn about anywhere he may please. And this is the only point he applied the illustration, and not, that is, to any declaration of the rule of life, but only to the complete obedience and silence enforced upon us. And we ought to observe this in all cases, that we are not to take the illustrations as pertaining to everything, but to select the good of them, and the purpose for which they were introduced, and then to leave the rest alone. As, for instance, when he says, "He couched, he lay down as a lion; Numbers 24:9" let us receive from this the unconquerable and fearful part, but not the brutality, nor any other of the things belonging to a lion. And again, when He says, "I will meet them as a bereaved bear Hosea 13:8," let us take the vindictiveness. And when he says, "our God is a consuming fire Hebrews 12:29", the wasting power exerted in punishing. So also here must we single out the clay, the potter, and the vessels. And when he does go on to say, "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?" do not suppose that this is said by Paul as an account of the creation, nor as implying a necessity over the will, but only to illustrate the sovereignty and difference of dispensations; for if we do not take it in this way, various incongruities will follow - for if he was here speaking about the will, and those who are good and those not so, then He will be Himself the Maker of these, and man will be free from all responsibility. And at this rate, then Paul would also be shown to be in contradiction to himself, since he always bestows the highest honor upon free choice. Therefore, there is nothing else which he wishes to do here, except to persuade the hearer to yield entirely to God and at no time to call Him to account for anything whatever. For as the potter (he says) of the same lump makes what he pleases, and no one forbids it; thus also when God, of the same race of men, punishes some, and honors others, be not thou curious nor meddlesome herein, but worship only, and imitate the clay. And as it follows the hands of the potter, so do thou also the mind of Him that so orders things. For He works nothing at random, or mere hazard, though thou be ignorant of the secret of His Wisdom. Yet you allow the other of the same lump to make various things, and find no fault: but of Him you demand an account of His punishments and honors, and will not allow Him to know who is worthy and who is not so; but since the same lump is of the same substance, you assert that there are the same dispositions. And, how monstrous this is! And yet the honor and the dishonor of the things made of the lump actually depends not upon the potter, but upon how they that handle the vessels use them, so here also it depends on the free choice. Still, as I said before, one must take this illustration to have one bearing only, which is that one should not contravene God, but yield to His incomprehensible Wisdom.

...their ill-timed obstinacy he silenced in this way with becoming superiority. And then he introduces his answer. Now what is the answer?

Ver. 22, 23, 24. What if God, willing to show His wrath, and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom He has chosen, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.

What he means is somewhat as follows. Pharaoh was a vessel of wrath, that is, a man who by his own hard-heartedness had kindled the wrath of God. For after enjoying much long-suffering, he became no better, but remained unimproved. Wherefore he calls him not only a vessel of wrath, but also one fitted for destruction. That is, fully fitted indeed, but by his own proper self. For neither had God left out anything of the things likely to recover him, nor did he leave out anything of those that would ruin him, and put him beyond any forgiveness. Yet still, though God knew this, He endured him with much long-suffering, being willing to bring him to repentance. For if He had He not willed this, then He would not have been thus long-suffering. But as he would not use the long-suffering in order to repentance, but fully fitted himself for wrath, He used him for the correction of others, through the punishment inflicted upon him making them better, and in this way setting forth His power. For that it is not God's wish that His power be so made known, but in another way, by His benefits, namely, and kindnesses, he had shown above in all possible ways. For if Paul does not wish to appear powerful in this way (not that we should appear approved, he says, but that you should do that which is

honest,) 2 Corinthians 13:7, much less does God. But after that he had shown long-suffering, that He might lead to repentance, but he did not repent, He suffered him a long time, that He might display at once His goodness and His power, even if that man were not minded to gain anything from this great long-suffering. As then by punishing this man, who continued incorrigible, He showed His power, so by having pitied those who had done many sins but repented, He manifested His love toward man. But it does not say, "love towards man," but "glory," to show that this is especially God's glory, and for this He was above all things earnest. But in saying, which He had afore prepared unto glory, he does not mean that all is God's doing. Since if this were so, there were nothing to hinder all men from being saved. But he is setting forth again His foreknowledge, and doing away with the difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. And on this topic again he grounds a defense of his statement, which is no small one. For it was not in the case of the Jews only that some men perished, and some were saved, but with the Gentiles also this was the case. Wherefore he does not say, all the Gentiles, but, of the Gentiles, nor, all the Jews, but, of the Jews. As then Pharaoh became a vessel of wrath by his own lawlessness, so did these become vessels of mercy by their own readiness to obey. For though the more part is of God, still they also have contributed themselves some little. Whence he does not say either, vessels of well-doing, or vessels of boldness (παρρησίας), but vessels of mercy, to show that the whole is of God. For the phrase, "it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs," even if it comes in the course of the objection, still, were it said by Paul, would create no difficulty. Because when he says, "it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs," he does not deprive us of free-will, but shows that all is not one's own, for that it requires grace from above. For it is binding on us to will, and also to run: but to confide not in our own labors, but in the love of God toward man. And this he has expressed elsewhere: "Yet not I, but the grace which was with me." 1 Corinthians 15:10 And he well says, "Which He had afore prepared unto glory." For since they reproached them with this, that they were saved by grace, and thought to make them ashamed, he far more than sets aside this insinuation. For if the thing brought glory even to God, much more to them through whom God was glorified. But observe his forbearance, and unspeakable wisdom. For when he had it in his power to adduce, as an instance of those punished, not Pharaoh, but such of the Jews as had sinned, and so make his discourse much clearer, and show that where there were the same fathers, and the same sins, some perished, and some had mercy shown them, and persuade them not to be doubtful-minded, even if some of the Gentiles were saved, while the Jews were perishing; that he might not make his discourse irksome, the showing forth of the punishment he draws from the foreigner, so that he may not be forced to call them vessels of wrath. But those that obtained mercy he draws from the people of the Jews. And besides, he also has spoken in a sufficient way in God's behalf, because though He knew very well that the nation was fitting itself as a vessel of destruction, still He contributed all on His part, His patience, His long-suffering, and that not merely long-suffering, but much long-suffering; yet still he was not minded to state it barely against the Jews. Whence then are some vessels of wrath, and some of mercy? Of their own free choice. God, however, being very good, shows the same kindness to both. For it was not those in a state of salvation only to whom He showed mercy, but also Pharaoh, as far as His part went. For of the same long-suffering, both they and he had the advantage. And if he was not saved, it was quite owing to his own will: since, as for what concerns God, he had as much done for him as they who were saved.

...Ver. 28. He will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness, he says, because a short work will the Lord make upon the earth. (Isaiah 10:23, Septuagint)

What he means then is something like this: There is no need of fetching a circuit, and of trouble, and the vexation of the works of the Law, for salvation is by a very short way. For such is faith, it holds salvation in a few short words. "For if you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." (Romans 10:9) Now you see what this, "the Lord shall make a short word (LXX. lit.) upon earth", is. And what is indeed wonderful is that this short word carries with it not salvation only, but also righteousness.

...Ver. 30, 31. What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have

attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness.

Here at last is the clearest answer. For since he had used a proof as well from facts (for they are not all Israel that are of Israel) as from the case of the forefathers Jacob and Esau, and from the prophets Hosea and Isaiah, he further gives the most decisive answer, after first adding to the perplexity. The points discussed, then, are two; First: that the Gentiles attained, and secondly: that they attained it without following after it, that is, without taking pains about it. And again in the Jews' case also there are two difficulties of the same kind; one that Israel attained not, the other that, though they took pains, they attained not. Whence also his use of words is more emphatic. For he does not say that they had, but that they attained to righteousness. For what is especially new and unusual is, that they who followed after it attained not, but they which followed not after it attained. And he seems to be indulging them by saying, followed after. But afterwards he strikes the blow home. For since he had a strong answer to give them, he had no fear of making the objection a little harsher. Hence he does not speak of faith either, and the righteousness ensuing thereon, but shows that before the faith even, on their own ground they were worsted and condemned. For thou, O Jew, he says, hast not found even the righteousness which was by the Law. For you have transgressed it, and become liable to the curse. But these that came not through the Law, but by another road, have found a greater righteousness than this, that, namely, which is of faith. And this he had also said before. "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has whereof to glory, but not before God," so showing that the other righteousness was greater than this. Before, then, I said that there were two difficulties, but now they have even become three questions: that the Gentiles found righteousness, and found it without following after it, and found a greater than that of the Law. These same difficulties are again felt in the Jews' case with an opposite view. That Israel did not find, and though he took pains he did not find, and did not find even the less. Having then thrust his hearer into perplexity, he proceeds to give a concise answer, and tells him the cause of all that is said. When then is the cause?

Ver. 32. Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the Law.

This is the clearest answer in the passage, which if he had said immediately upon starting he would not have gained so easy a hearing. But since it is after many perplexities, and preparations, and demonstrations that he sets it down, and after using countless preparatory steps, he has at last made it more intelligible, and also more easily admitted. For this he says is the cause of their destruction: Because it was not by faith, but as it were by the works of the Law, that they wished to be justified. And he does not say, by works, but, as it were by the works of the Law, to show that they had not even this righteousness. For they stumbled at that stumbling-stone;

Ver. 33. As it is written, Behold I lay in Sion a stumbling-stone, and rock of offense: and whosoever believes in Him shall not be ashamed.

You see again how it is from faith that the boldness comes, and the gift is universal; since it is not of the Jews only that this is said, but also of the whole human race. For every one, he would say, whether Jew, or Grecian, or Scythian, or Thracian, or whatsoever else he may be, will, if he believes, enjoy the privilege of great boldness.

ORIGEN (250AD)

Origen was a Christian teacher and native koine Greek speaker from about 250AD. He dictated massive amounts of commentaries on Scripture - sadly, most of which have been lost. It should be noted that although his scriptural commentaries were held in high esteem, some of his later speculative theology was anathematized - most notably, postulating the possibility of the pre-existence of souls and the eventual redemption of everyone, including the devil (after spending time in hell). Although these cautions are in order,

his work is generally orthodox and he was never condemned in his own lifetime for teaching anything contrary to church consensus. He wrote the following in his commentary on Romans. (A modern English translation is available by Thomas P. Scheck).

God does not merely know the purpose and intention of each person, but He also foreknows it... He puts to His use the desires and purpose of each person, so as to bring about the works the mind and will each individual has chosen...

Origen writes that God knows what people will do, so He sets things in place in the world so that their foreknown-yet-contingent choices fit into His larger plan. Origen then uses the examples of a king who foreknew that particular subjects of his would rebel. What if, then, the king chose someone extremely resistant and depraved - someone deserving not only of correction, but even deserving of death - and used that person as an example that would serve as a warning to the others? Since the king wants his destruction to be used for the correction of others, he brings him before the others and announces,

"For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the world." Notice that he has not said, "For this purpose I have made you," for in that case the blame would seem to be directed against the Creator. But he says, "For this purpose I have raised you up," that is, through the evil intentions of your own mind, which you have obtained for yourself... having no fear of God... so that your striking destruction might be made known to others as an example to them.

Origen notes that the people who made faithless demands upon Jesus to tell them "By what authority you do these things" were not considered worthy of an answer. Similarly, Paul reacts to those who would ask rude and demanding questions:

In the same way a worthless slave who does not want to do the work commanded by the master begins to talk about the orders and ask of the master, "For what purpose are you ordering this job? Who cares about it? Why is it really needed?" what could be a better answer to the haughty slave than "Who are you to reply against your master?"

Origen notes that if we are faithful and discerning servants, and we ask a question because we really want to understand and appreciate God's wisdom, we will not be rebuked in this way. After all, Daniel desired to know the will of the Lord and was called "man of desires" (Daniel 9:23) for it. He was not rebuked but an angel of the Lord was sent to instruct him. Origen concludes that if we are "men of desires" and not men of impudent debates, we may in humility and faith inquire into the Scriptures for the answer to these questions in Romans 9. For those who are insolent, let them be satisfied with the rebuke, "Has the Potter no right over the clay?" Origen tells us that if a willing heart wants to hear the answers to the questions in Romans 9, they only need to turn to Paul's letter to Timothy. He points us further on to the other time Paul mentions vessels of honor and dishonor - 2 Timothy 2:20. I had never heard anyone connect the two passages, but what could make more sense when reading Scripture in light of Scripture? The same author, Paul, makes the same illustration: Vessels of honor and dishonor. Origen continues:

"But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. If, therefore, anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful to the Master, prepared for every good work." Do you hear how Paul now, where he had no arrogant opponent, has explained these various kinds of vessels? ...[in Romans] he said nothing

regarding the grounds for there being "some for honor, and some for reproach," but in this passage he has explained this openly... Therefore it follows that anyone who has not cleansed himself and has not washed away the stains of sin through repentance, he would be a vessel for reproach. And if he should increase in wickedness and would entirely despise being converted, he would become not simply a vessel of reproach but now a vessel of wrath."

Origen presents several possible explanations of Romans 9. Paul is certainly interacting with a hostile "persona" - the one asking impertinent questions. Origen finds it unsustainable that Paul - who elsewhere urged people to "so run that you may win" and to "fight the good fight" - is here suggesting that "running and willing" are irrelevant. Origen suggests that it is possible that the discussion unfolds in the following manner:

Persona: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?"

Paul: By no means!

Persona: "For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

Paul: You will say to me then,

Persona: "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"

Paul: But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay...

Origen is not overly attached to this interpretation, though, and presents other options for faithfully approaching the passage. He ultimately concludes that portions of the passage are confusing because Paul is addressing the impudent *persona* (a non-Christian Jew who wishes to justify himself based on God's selection of his Jewish heritage and not based on Christ), and Paul intends to ask a series of questions which are designed to throw this person into confusion and unable to answer Paul's questions. He does this to bring the *persona* into a more teachable state. Paul then continues and provides some answers in the later passages of Romans 9 as well as in Romans 10 and 11.

Origen also comments on the manner in which God hardened Pharaoh's heart. It is as though a master treated his servant well, and the servant took advantages of his privilege. Such a master might comment, "I have made you bad." Certainly it was not the master reaching into the servant's heart that made him bad, but it was giving the servant good gifts which the servant abused which made him bad. Origen presents other ways in which God might be said to harden a heart while not being the author of that heart's sin.

AMBROSIASTER (370AD?)

Ambrosiaster is the name given to the author of several works from the late fourth century. It was generally presumed that Ambrose was the author of these works until Erasmus made significant arguments against this. Regardless, his teaching as a whole is generally considered "orthodox" although a bit confusing when it comes to foreknowledge. He makes several comments which seem odd to modern ears and the way these issues are now framed. He argues that when God calls, He calls irresistibly, but He calls only those whom He foreknows

will freely believe and persist - thus, there is no injustice with God. It is likely that Ambrosiaster worked primarily, if not solely, with the Latin texts and did not speak Greek like Irenaeus, Origen, and Chrysostom. I view him as an outlier in the discussion. Some extracts of his commentary on Romans follow. (His full commentary on Romans can be obtained through the Ancient Christian Texts collection).

Romans 8:28... Those who are called according to the promise are those whom God knew would be true believers in the future, so that even before they believed they were known...

Romans 9:14... In the same way [God] condemned Pharaoh from foreknowledge, knowing that he would not reform, and chose the apostle Paul when he was still persecuting the church, knowing that he would turn out to be good later on...

Ambrosiaster might seem to be playing with a bit of fire here and merging foreknown merit with foreknown faith. Lest we judge him too harshly, every student of the Bible would affirm that faith without works is dead. But also consider his commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:4, where he writes, “*God has decreed that one who believes in Christ can be saved without works - simply by faith he receives forgiveness of his sins.*” It is common to find that the early church fathers describe faith in God with words pertaining to goodness and obedience - for it is good to obey the gospel call to have faith in Jesus. Regardless, it is clear that Ambrosiaster does not countenance unconditional election.

Romans 9:11-13... When the gentiles appeared and accepted the salvation which the Jews had lost, Paul’s grief was stirred, but this was mainly because they [the Jews] were the cause of their own damnation.

Ambrosiaster’s commentary above is consistent with an Arminian paradigm. In Romans 9:15, Ambrosiaster paraphrases God to provide greater clarity:

Romans 9:15. “I will have mercy,” he says, “on the one whom I know in advance that I will show mercy to, because I know that he will be converted and remain with me. And I will show compassion to the person whom I know will come back to me, having put his heart right after his error.” In other words, God will give to the one who is meant to be given to and not give to the one who is not meant to be given to, so that he will call whomever he knows will obey, and he will not call whomever he knows will not obey. For to call someone is to compel him to accept the faith.

Ambrosiaster breaks with prior Church consensus on the nature of “calling.” Nevertheless, although Ambrosiaster affirms a type of irresistible grace - “to call someone is to compel him to accept the faith” - he soundly rejects the idea of unconditional election. In Ambrosiaster’s view, God’s election is based on foreseen obedience. Believing the gospel message is referred to as obedience in Scripture (2 Thessalonians 1:8), and it could be argued this is the ‘obedience’ Ambrosiaster has in mind.

...Romans 9:18. Here Paul assumes the role of an objector who thinks God is gracious to somebody without regard for justice, so that faced two people who are identical, he accepts the one and rejects the other. This is what actually happens. He compels one to believe and hardens the other so that he will not believe. God answers the objector on the basis of his authority, but justice is maintained on the basis of the foreknowledge that I mentioned above.

Again, we see that Ambrosiaster does not frame this issue in the way we would expect! To Ambrosiaster,

God's ultimate reason for calling someone is due to their foreseen faith/obedience, and His calling "compels" the belief or lack of belief, confirming in them what they would have freely chosen. To modern minds he seems to be a strange hybrid of Arminian, Roman Catholic, and Calvinist views. He affirms conditional election on the basis of faith/obedience, and he also affirms irresistible grace - but in an odd way.

IRENAEUS (180AD)

Last, but certainly not least, I present Irenaeus of Lyons. **Irenaeus** addressed Romans 9 very specifically as he refuted heretics who misused it.

"Refutation of the arguments of the Marcionites, who attempted to show that God was the author of sin, because He blinded Pharaoh and his servants."

1. But, say they, 'God hardened the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants'. [Exodus 9:35] Those, then, who allege such difficulties, do not read in the Gospel that passage where the Lord replied to the disciples, when they asked Him, 'Why do You speak unto them in parables?— Because it is given unto you to know the mystery of the kingdom of heaven; but to them I speak in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not hear, understanding they may not understand; in order that the prophecy of Isaiah regarding them may be fulfilled, saying, 'Make the heart of this people gross and make their ears dull, and blind their eyes. But blessed are your eyes, which see the things that you see; and your ears, which hear what you hear'. [Matthew 13:11-16; Isaiah 6:10] For one and the same God that blesses others inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, acts with regard to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind. In accordance with this word, therefore, does the apostle say, in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'In whom the God of this world has blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ should shine unto them'. [2 Corinthians 4:4] And again, in that to the Romans: 'And as they did not think fit to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up to a reprobate mind, to do those things that are not convenient.' [Romans 1:28] Speaking of antichrist, too, he says clearly in the Second to the Thessalonians: 'And for this cause God shall send them the working of error, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but consented to iniquity.' [2 Thessalonians 2:11]

2. If, therefore, in the present time also, God, knowing the number of those who will not believe, since He foreknows all things, has given them over to unbelief, and turned away His face from men of this stamp, leaving them in the darkness which they have themselves chosen for themselves, what is there wonderful if He did also at that time give over to their unbelief, Pharaoh, who never would have believed, along with those who were with him? As the Word spoke to Moses from the bush: 'And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, unless by a mighty hand'. [Exodus 3:19] And for the reason that the Lord spoke in parables, and brought blindness upon Israel, that seeing they might not see, since He knew the [spirit of] unbelief in them, for the same reason did He harden Pharaoh's heart; in order that, while seeing that it was the finger of God which led forth the people, he might not believe, but be precipitated into a sea of unbelief...

Elsewhere, Irenaeus writes on God's ability as a skilled potter to shape willing vessels for blessing, or to destroy unwilling vessels. In this passage he combines numerous scripture passages (such as Romans 9,

Jeremiah 18, 2 Timothy 2:20, Song of Solomon, etc), poetically combined into a cohesive whole:

For it must be that you, at the outset, should hold the rank of a man, and then afterwards partake of the glory of God. For you did not make God, but God you. If, then, you are God's workmanship, await the hand of your Maker which creates everything in due time; in due time as far as you are concerned, whose creation is being carried out.

*Offer to Him your heart in a soft and tractable state,
and preserve the form in which the Creator has fashioned you,
having moisture in yourself,
lest, by becoming hardened,
you lose the impressions of His fingers.*

But by preserving the framework you shall ascend to that which is perfect, for the moist clay which is in you is hidden there by the workmanship of God.

*His hand fashioned your substance;
He will cover you over too within and without with pure gold and silver,
and He will adorn you to such a degree, that even the King Himself shall have pleasure in your beauty.*

But if you, being obstinately hardened, reject the operation of His skill, and show yourself ungrateful towards Him, because you were created a mere man, by becoming thus ungrateful to God, you have at once lost both His workmanship and life. For creation is an attribute of the goodness of God but to be created is that of human nature. If then, you shall deliver up to Him what is yours, that is, faith towards Him and subjection, you shall receive His handiwork, and shall be a perfect work of God.

If, however, you will not believe in Him, and will flee from His hands, the cause of imperfection shall be in you who did not obey, but not in Him who called you. For He commissioned messengers to call people to the marriage, but they who did not obey Him deprived themselves of the royal supper.³ The skill of God, therefore, is not defective, for He has power of the stones to raise up children to Abraham;⁴ but the man who does not obtain it is the cause to himself of his own imperfection. Nor, in like manner, does the light fail because of those who have blinded themselves; but while it remains the same as ever, those who are thus blinded are involved in darkness through their own fault. The light does never enslave anyone by necessity; nor, again, does God exercise compulsion upon anyone unwilling to accept the exercise of His skill. Those persons, therefore, who have apostatized from the light given by the Father, and transgressed the law of liberty, have done so through their own fault, since they have been created free agents, and possessed of power over themselves.

But God, foreknowing all things, prepared fit habitations for both, kindly conferring that light which they desire on those who seek after the light of incorruption, and resort to it; but for the despisers and mockers who avoid and turn themselves away from this light, and who do, as it were, blind themselves, He has prepared darkness suitable to persons who oppose the light, and He has inflicted an appropriate punishment

³ *Matthew 22:3, etc.*

⁴ *Matthew 3:9*

upon those who try to avoid being subject to Him. Submission to God is eternal rest, so that they who shun the light have a place worthy of their flight; and those who fly from eternal rest, have a habitation in accordance with their fleeing. Now, since all good things are with God, they who by their own determination fly from God, do defraud themselves of all good things; and having been thus defrauded of all good things with respect to God, they shall consequently fall under the just judgment of God. For those persons who shun rest shall justly incur punishment, and those who avoid the light shall justly dwell in darkness. For as in the case of this temporal light, those who shun it do deliver themselves over to darkness, so that they do themselves become the cause to themselves that they are destitute of light, and do inhabit darkness; and, as I have already observed, the light is not the cause of such an unhappy condition of existence to them; so those who fly from the eternal light of God, which contains in itself all good things, are themselves the cause to themselves of their inhabiting eternal darkness, destitute of all good things, having become to themselves the cause of their consignment to an abode of that nature. (Against Heresies, Book 4, chapter 39)

SUMMARY OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS VIEW ON ROMANS 9

Far from being ignorant of Romans 9 and other Calvinist proof texts, the early Church was familiar with all of Scripture, and diligently sought to interpret it in accord with Apostolic teaching and the standard of faith that had been faithfully passed down to them. As native Greek speakers familiar with Hebraic themes in Scripture, they did not see Romans 9 as a rejection of libertarian free will. They saw it as a rejection of two errors: legalistic works-salvation and ethnocentric entitlement. They read Paul's letter to the Romans without chapter and verse divisions, and they saw it properly as a flow of thought leading from Romans 8 through Romans 11, with the clearest point being made at the end of Romans 9 - those who seek salvation by the works of the law rather than by faith will not be saved, but those who trust in God's mercy through Christ will be saved.

Perhaps the best way to conclude would be to echo the pastoral advice of Irenaeus:

You did not make God, but God you. If, then, you are God's workmanship, await the hand of your Maker which creates everything in due time; in due time as far as you are concerned, whose creation is being carried out. Offer to Him your heart in a soft and tractable state... For creation is an attribute of the goodness of God but to be created is that of human nature. If then, you shall deliver up to Him what is yours, that is, faith towards Him and subjection, you shall receive His handiwork, and shall be a perfect work of God. If, however, you will not believe in Him, and will flee from His hands, the cause of imperfection shall be in you who did not obey, but not in Him who called you.