

Does God Call All the Shots? **By Charles Edward White**

“Let’s roll!” When Todd Beamer used these words to start a passenger revolt against his plane’s hijackers, he was acting on his belief that our choices and actions make a difference in the world. And we know he was right because his sacrificial deeds probably saved either the White House or the Capitol from destruction on September 11. The Muslims who took over the plane, on the other hand, most likely had a different view. If they believed what the Qur’an says, they thought all their actions were preordained. They thought that God makes all the choices in the universe and that human beings are puppets He fully controls. What may surprise many of us is to find that many Christians share this Muslim-like view of God. They see Him as the absolute sovereign of the universe, making all the decisions, even electing some people to go to heaven and the rest to go to hell.

Christians who believe in this kind of sovereignty are often called Calvinists, because John Calvin (1509-1564) said the idea of God’s control is the central teaching of the Bible. Although he was an insightful teacher of other scriptural truths, Calvin thought he found this doctrine of predestination throughout the Bible. The place where he saw it most clearly was Romans 9, but two major mistakes clouded his vision when he read this chapter. The first is that he forgot to consider the context in which Paul puts Romans 9, and the second is that he ignored the biblical idioms that Paul uses.

Context: The Whole Book (Romans 1-16)

John Calvin’s first mistake in understanding Romans 9 was to forget the context in which this chapter appears. He treated it as if it had just popped into existence, instead of being preceded by eight other chapters and followed by seven. But when we read Romans 9 in context we see that it continues Paul’s message that God saves people by faith. In chapters 1 through 3 Paul shows why everyone needs to be saved. In chapter 4 he shows that Abraham was not saved by keeping the law, but by trusting God, through faith. In chapters 5 through 8 Paul explains the relationship between faith and the law. He answers the question, “If the law is good, why can’t it save people?”

Then in chapter 9 Paul raises another question about the law, “If the law is good, and God gave the Jews the law as part of His plan to save the world, why are so few of them saved?” After a long discussion he answers the question in 9:32, saying that no matter how important the roles people play in God’s plan to save the world, nobody is saved without faith. Since many of the Jews have not responded to God in faith, many of them are not saved.

Then in chapter 10 Paul explains the reasons for Israel’s unbelief, and in 11 he reveals God’s long-range plans for the Jews. Having spent 11 chapters explaining God’s plan to save the world through faith, Paul devotes the rest of the book to pointing out the difference these truths should make in our lives and finally passes along greetings in chapter 16.

Context: Ishmael and Esau (Romans 9:6-13)

Calvin didn’t see Romans 9 as part of the whole book. He thought that Paul drops his discussion of faith and the law, and now starts to explain individual election. Calvin believed that the answer to Paul’s implied question as to why so few Jews are saved is that God does not want to save them. Calvin based this understanding on verses 6 through 13, which in his view teach that Ishmael and Esau are damned. What these verses actually say is that Isaac is the son of promise and that God chose Jacob, not Esau. Although Ishmael is not even mentioned, Calvin concluded that because Isaac is the child of promise, Ishmael and Abraham’s six other sons (1 Chronicles 1:28-34) must be damned. This wrong conclusion is belied by nine scripture passages where God promises to bless Ishmael or his descendants (Genesis 16:10, 12; 17:20, 23; 21:13, 18, 20; 25:13; Isaiah 60:7). Repeatedly God promises to increase him, to make him fruitful and to make him a great nation. Nowhere does the Bible say anything negative about Ishmael’s eternal state. To ignore the context of what the Bible says about Ishmael, and to infer from Isaac’s status as the child of promise that Ishmael is damned, is to miss Paul’s point.

Similarly, when we see what the rest of the Bible says about Esau, it is hard to conclude that God damned him as well. True, the Bible reports Esau’s early sins, but by the end of his life Esau is so favored by God that it takes a whole chapter to record his bounty (Genesis 36). Once again, to ignore the context that tells of Esau’s final blessing is to misunderstand the text.

Idiom: Hate (Romans 9:13)

Calvin would reply that Paul himself says that Esau is damned. After all, doesn't Paul quote from Malachi 1:2-3 in Romans 9:13: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"?

Here Calvin makes his second interpretative mistake. Although he knew the biblical languages, Calvin seemed to forget that the Bible uses idioms.

True, both the Hebrew word Malachi uses (*sane*) and the Greek word Paul uses (*miseo*) can convey the active malice that comes with the English word "hate," which is used to translate them. But *sane* and *miseo* can also be idioms that simply mean to "love less." Genesis 29:31 says that Jacob "*saned*" Leah, meaning only that he loved her less than Rachel. Similarly in Luke 14:26, Jesus tells us to *miseo* our families but in the parallel passage recorded in Matthew 10:37, he tells us merely to love them less.

So when read in the light of its Old Testament context (where the verse means that God was more gracious to the nation of Israel than to the nation of Edom), and remembering that "hate" can be an idiom for loving less, Romans 9:13 says that God blessed Jacob and his family more than he blessed Esau and his family. Along with blessing Jacob by making his family large and influential the way Esau's was, God gave Jacob's family the extra blessing of letting them have a place in His plan to save people. God used Jacob's family to bring Jesus into the world.

Context and Idiom: God's Mercy (Romans 9:14-15)

Calvin made both the idiom mistake and the context mistake when he read Romans 9:14-15. Here Paul quotes Exodus 33:19, where God says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Calvin saw these verses as God's assertion that He has the right to save only those He chooses—out of all possible candidates for mercy and compassion God will elect only a few to bless.

When we read these verses in English it is easy to forget that a Hebrew idiom uses repetition for emphasis. For example, when the Hebrew language is used to express the idea of the best king or the best song it says "king of kings" or "song of songs." Thus when God says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," the Hebrew idiom means, "I will be very merciful."

This correct understanding of the Hebrew idiom fits in with the context from which Paul gets this quote. In Exodus 33 God is revealing His character, showing what kind of God He really is. God tells Moses that He will let him know Him personally, and know that He is a God who is very merciful and compassionate. To say that these verses which in Exodus so clearly proclaim God's grace, now in Romans limit God's mercy, neglects both the idiom and the context.

The way Paul uses these verses in his argument clearly shows that it is a mistake to reverse the meaning of the Exodus 33 quote in Romans 9. If Paul were really claiming that God has the right to limit His mercy, his argument would say, "Is God unjust? No, He is arbitrary. He has the right to do as He pleases." This is what Calvin thought Paul is saying.

But it is not what Paul says. Such an answer is really no answer at all. It would be like telling someone who felt the verdict in the O.J. Simpson trial was unjust, "A jury can do what it wants." Instead, Paul offers a better argument. To the one who says, "Is God unjust?" he responds, "No, God goes beyond justice to be very merciful."

Context: Pharaoh (Romans 9:16-18)

Once again, recalling the Old Testament context is crucial to understanding Paul's argument about Pharaoh. Read apart from the Exodus account, Paul's words about Pharaoh make God seem like a puppet master, completely controlling Pharaoh's behavior. But when we read Exodus we see a more subtle relationship. Exodus tells the story of God's relationship with Pharaoh in chapters 4 through 14. Seventeen times the text mentions the condition of Pharaoh's heart, using five different words or phrases to describe it.

The first mention of hardening is when the Lord twice promises to harden Pharaoh's heart sometime in the future. Then two times the text states that Pharaoh's heart became hard without mentioning who did the hardening. Next come four instances that alternate between Pharaoh hardening his own heart and the simple declaration that Pharaoh's heart was hard. Finally the text says that God took action to harden Pharaoh's heart. Only after the text twice says that Pharaoh hardened his heart, does it tell us that God continued the process.

Far from making God a puppet master controlling Pharaoh, the Exodus text shows that both Pharaoh and the Lord were involved in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. God's action comes only after Pharaoh initiates the

process. The Lord's actions of making Pharaoh's heart hard are His judgmental response to Pharaoh's sin. Just as in Romans 1, where God responds to human sinfulness by giving the sinner over to greater sin, so here God punishes Pharaoh by allowing him to go on to greater sin in the path he has chosen. Prudence would dictate that Pharaoh should give in to God's demands. This is the course of action Pharaoh's magicians counsel (Exodus 8:19). After being defeated by the first three plagues, Pharaoh might have done the right thing for the wrong reason: he might have yielded to the Lord out of fear and weakness. God, however, forestalls this possibility by "hardening" Pharaoh's heart, by giving him the resolve to continue to resist. The Lord gives Pharaoh the courage to do what he really wants to do instead of allowing him to surrender out of fear. Thus the text pictures a subtle interplay of human and divine actions. It does not portray God's heavy hand controlling a passive will. Rather it shows Pharaoh misusing God's good gifts. He uses the strength and determination supplied to him by the Lord in order to stand against God when a lesser man would capitulate out of fearful weakness.

Context: The Potter and the Clay (Romans 9:19-24)

When questioned about the injustice of God's supposed election of some for salvation and others for damnation, Calvin replied in the words of Romans 9:20, asserting that no one has the right to question God about anything. This surface reading of the text is wrong, because it ignores the biblical context of the metaphor Paul uses. Four times in the Old Testament God likens himself to a potter and people to clay (Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jeremiah 18:); and Paul uses this word picture one other time (2 Timothy 2:20-21). Far from picturing God as active and humanity as passive, these passages show that God is responsive to people's actions. Paul even tells the pots to clean themselves up!

When Paul uses pottery imagery in Romans 9, he is probably thinking of Isaiah 45:9, where God tells people they should not question his use of Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem. Here God is not talking about individual salvation or damnation. What God says is beyond question is His decision to use an "unsaved" person to help save His people. What God says in Isaiah fits in exactly with what Paul is arguing in Romans 9. Just as God can use the pagan Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem, so God can use the unbelieving Jewish nation to bring Jesus to the world. Paul's point is not that no one can question God about salvation or damnation, but that God is free to use anyone He wishes in His plan to save the world.

Continuing with his pottery imagery, Paul says that God has the right to make some vessels for noble purposes and others for common use. With these words, Paul is continuing his argument that God can use whomever He chooses to bring salvation to the world. His point is that God gives some people an important role in His big plan (vessels for noble purposes) while others do not play such a part (vessels for common use). Calvin misread these words, however, and thought that Paul says that God can make some pots for noble use and others for destruction. Calvin pictured the kind of potter who makes beautiful vases for display and clay pigeons to be shot out of the air.

Calvin misread verse 22, thinking that God is a potter who uses His clay to make targets for himself to show His power to destroy. Instead, when Paul talks about "vessels prepared for destruction" we can see from the preceding context that he is talking about people like Pharaoh. God prepares Pharaoh's punishment when He postpones it. The Lord could have punished Pharaoh immediately after his first refusal to "let my people go," but God delays His judgment in order to show Israel, the Egyptians, and the whole world that He is the one, true God. Paul is not saying that God prepares people for destruction before the foundation of the world, but that as He works out His plan to save humanity God doesn't always punish people as quickly as they deserve.

The Big Idea

In Romans 9, like the rest of the book, Paul is explaining God's plan to save the world. The main questions he answers involve faith and the law, as well as the role of Jews and Gentiles. In Romans 9 the problem is, "Why are so few Jews saved?" Calvin saw the answer in God's unsearchable decree of predestination. Calvin said in effect, "So few Jews are saved because God only elects to save a few."

The real answer is different. The real answer fits in with all that Paul has said in the previous eight chapters about being saved by faith and with what he will say in the next two chapters about the nation of Israel. "Why are so few Jews saved?" Paul asks. "Because they have tried to earn their salvation by works instead of receiving it as a free gift through faith," he answers.

His explanation is, "Although God used the Jewish people to bring salvation to the world, this doesn't mean that every individual Jew is saved. Even having a role in God's plan won't save anyone without faith."

Romans 9 emphasizes the central truth of the book of Romans: "The righteous will live by faith" (1:17). So when we read Paul's words with careful attention to the context and to the idioms he uses, we join him in praising the mercy and wisdom of God: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11:30). From Paul's explanation of how God saves people we see that the real God is not Allah the despot who calls all the shots in the universe, but a loving Father who invites people to join Him in the family business of saving the world.