

Romans 9:21 and the Doctrine of Election

In trying to defend the Calvin's doctrine of Unconditional Election, advocates often refer to Romans 9:21,

"Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"

The argument for Unconditional Election is posed like this: "The lump of clay refers to all humanity and from that lump God elects some individuals for salvation and others for damnation."

When Romans 9:21 is taken out of context, the verse does indeed seem to support the idea of Unconditional Election as taught by Calvinists. The problem with Calvinism's use of Romans 9:21 is made evident when placed in its proper context and interpreted as part of its surroundings. As the old saying goes, "A passage out of context often becomes a pretext."

The Context of Romans 9:21

The point of Romans chapters 9-11 is to show that God is sovereign, and that He has been faithful to Israel.

One of the main things Paul is combatting in this section of Scripture is that **Israel was chosen for service and not salvation.**

1- Paul does not see Israel as being in a saved condition. The remedy is not to reform Israel, but to convert her.

Romans 9:1-3

¹ I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh,

Clearly Paul views his countrymen (Israel) as in a lost condition. Paul again describes Israel as lost in the following chapter:

Romans 10:1-4

¹ Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.

Paul was so grieved about the lost condition of Israel that he wished he might bear the penalty for his kinsmen so that they might be saved.

2- Israel was blessed by God and set apart for special service.

Romans 9:4-5

⁴ who are Israelites, to whom *pertain* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service *of God*, and the promises; ⁵ of whom *are* the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ *came*, who is over all, *the* eternally blessed God. Amen.

Israel was granted several blessing from God:

- 1- Adoption as sons (see Ex. 4:22).
- 2- The glory: The “Shekinah” which was the symbol of God’s presence with Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 13:21,22; 16:10).
- 3- The covenants: God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18), the covenant of circumcision (Acts 7:8), the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 23:5).
- 4- The giving of the Law: Both the Old Testament Law itself (Romans 3:1-2) as well as the way in which it was given (Deut. 4:33)
- 5- The service of God: The temple service (Hebrews 9:1-6; Leviticus 1-9).
- 6- The promises: The repeated promises of God to bring the Messiah through Israel (the Gospel of Matthew alone notes 30 of these promises).

The greatest of all the blessings innumerate here, was the last one: the privilege of being the people through whom God would bring the Christ into the world. However, Israel’s election for service was not a promise of salvation. Paul grieved over Israel’s lost condition (Romans 1:3) because she had squandered all the blessing God had bestowed upon her.

3- Not all Israel were of Israel

Romans 9:6

⁶ But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they *are* not all Israel who *are* of Israel,

The argument being combated by Paul is the same one the church combats today: **If Israel is not saved, then the word of God must have failed.**

Paul’s reply: God’s word has not failed. **“For they are not all Israel who are of Israel.”**

Paul distinguishes two Israels:

- A) National Israel
- B) Spiritual Israel

Romans 11:2-7

² God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, ³ *"LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life?"* ⁴ But what does the divine response say to him? *"I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."* ⁵ Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. ⁶ And if by grace, then *it is* no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if *it is* of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

⁷ What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; **but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded.**

The "elect" – Spiritual Israel

The "rest" – Physical Israel

Israel as a whole was not saved; only the remnant that remained faithful would be saved.

Romans 9:27

²⁷ Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel:

*" Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea,
The remnant will be saved.*

4- Not all of Abraham's descendants would be chosen for the service of bring the Messiah into the world.

Romans 9:7-9

nor *are they* all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." That is, those who *are* the children of the flesh, these *are* not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. ⁹ For this *is* the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son."

Though Abraham had several children (Ishmael, Isaac, and the sons of Keturah), Isaac alone was chosen to bring the Messiah into the world. Again, just because Isaac was chosen for a purpose does not mean he was elected for salvation, nor does it mean Ishmael and the sons of Keturah were elected for damnation.

To illustrate the point of election for service, Paul again points out that Sarah was chosen as the mother of the bloodline of Christ rather than Hagar or Keturah. God can choose people for special service without punishing those not chosen for the task.

5- One nation chosen over another nation.

Romans 9:10-13

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.”

God chose Jacob for service, rather than Esau, at the point they were both conceived in their mother’s womb. Though the selection of Isaac was made after the birth of Ishmael, the selection of Jacob was made before either was born and was not based upon any merit of good or evil. The selection had nothing to do with salvation; it had everything to do with the purpose of God.

Ordinarily, the first son to leave the mother’s womb would be considered the greater, but not so in the case of Jacob and Esau. What must be noted is that both prophecies quoted by Paul (Genesis 25:23 and Malachi 1:2-3) are in reference to the nations that would come through Jacob and Esau and not of the individuals themselves. Within their lifetimes Esau was the more prosperous of the two and was never in subjection to Jacob. In fact, Jacob was afraid of his brother when he returned to his homeland from Laban’s house (Genesis 32,32). It was not until the descendants of both Jacob and Esau became nations (Israel and Edom) that Genesis 25:23 was fulfilled.

The fact that Jacob (Israel) was “loved” while Esau (Edom) was “hated” had nothing to do with whether one nation could or could not be saved; it had everything to do with which one was elected for the service of bringing the Messiah into the world.

6- “What shall we say then?”

Romans 9:14

What shall we say then? *Is there* unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.

Based on his previous statements, Paul now answers an objection that some may raise in regard to God’s choosing some for service while not choosing others: Is God being unfair and unrighteous?

Gareth Reese hit the nail on the head when he wrote:

“Having shown that God was not unfaithful to His word (9:6-13), Paul now gives three reasons why men dare not accuse God of being unjust when He chooses some to do a special service, and not others. (1) Scripture reveals the principle of God’s free will, verses 15-18. (2) Mere man is not competent to

criticize the Creator (like he would be doing if he accused God of being unjust), verses 19-21. (3) Instead of thinking about injustice, men should be contemplating the motive behind God's actions – His mercy, verses 22-29.

God's plan for bringing the Messiah into the world required that the Messiah have an identifiable heritage. In making an identifiable heritage possible God had to choose certain individuals to perform the service of providing that heritage; such was unavoidable and not unfair.

Paul will now demonstrate how God made other choices for service that were also not unfair.

7- God's reasons for His choices

Romans 9:16-17

So then *it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ 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."

God's choice of service is not based upon man's intentions or actions (9:16), but is purely the product of God's volition. By way of example, Paul demonstrates how God selected and used a wicked man (Pharaoh) for service.

"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." (Ex. 9:16).

Moses spoke these words to Pharaoh after the sixth plague of boils. In Hebrew, the term "raised up" has to do with the sparing of life. God was telling Pharaoh through Moses that the reason He spared Pharaoh's life was so that He could demonstrate His power through Pharaoh in the future. God chose Pharaoh for the service of demonstrating His power so that His name could be proclaimed throughout the entire earth. The example of Pharaoh shows that the choosing of one for service has nothing to do with election for salvation.

8- Mercy and Hardening

Romans 9:18

Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

The example of Pharaoh demonstrates man's free will in submitting to the will of God and the consequences for rejecting God's will.

When Calvinists look at the story of Pharaoh they see a bully God stripping Pharaoh of free will and hardening him just so he can destroy him. Such a view is a misconstruing on the actual events of the story.

In verse 17 Paul recalls how God spoke to Pharaoh through Moses and revealed that His will was to be glorified through Pharaoh. In fact, the reason that God had spared Pharaoh's life through the sixth plague was so that He might be glorified. Yet the Bible says, "And when Pharaoh saw that the rain, the hail, and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet more; and he hardened his heart, he and his servants. ³⁵ So the heart of Pharaoh was hard; neither would he let the children of Israel go, as the LORD had spoken by Moses." (Ex. 9:34-35).

Moses reveals Pharaoh hardened his own heart by choice. God did not harden the heart of Pharaoh against Pharaoh's own will, but rather, Pharaoh's heart was hardened by his own choice in reply to the plagues which God sent.

George Battey states correctly:

"Pharaoh was not hardened by some mysterious or miraculous act of God. There were several factors which resulted in Pharaoh being hardened:

- a) ***The way God spoke*** to Pharaoh resulted in a hard heart. God demanded that Israel be set free (Ex 7:16). You just don't make demands of a king like Pharaoh without him becoming resentful!
- b) ***The thing God demanded*** of Pharaoh resulted in a hard heart. He demanded that all the Israelites be set free. If God had asked that only a few be set free, the story would have turned out differently (cf. Ex 10:8-11).
- c) ***The messengers used by God*** hardened Pharaoh's heart. Moses was old, a shepherd (which was an abomination to Egyptians), a fugitive and Moses threatened the kingdom of Egypt with a stick!
- d) ***The mercy offered by God*** resulted in hardening Pharaoh's heart. When reprieve was given at the end of certain plagues, Pharaoh hardened his heart (cf. Ex 8:15). Some people require constant pressure to impress upon their minds the need to comply with orders.

Moses Lard is also correct in his observation:

"God did not harden his heart (Pharaoh's) by any direct exertion of power upon it. On the contrary, so long as God operated on him through the plagues, his heart was either inclined to relent or did relent. But as soon as God ceased thus to operate on him, he at once relapsed into his old hardness... But when a man has so corrupted and hardened himself, as was the case with Pharaoh, that it requires the exertion of miraculous power to

subdue him; and where God has exerted that power on him once and again without its producing the desired effect; and when after this, he withholds the power, and the man still remains hard, let no one charge injustice on God. Rather let it be said that if he was unjust at all, it consisted in his excessive kindness to the obdurate and stupid heart that never responded to it... But the light in which Calvinism sets the case deserves a note. It represents God as using Pharaoh from his cradle to be the monster he was, and then as punishing him for being and doing precisely what he was impelled to be and do... But the Bible knows it not."

God was not unfair in how he dealt with Pharaoh. God did not create Pharaoh as the moral monster he was and then destroy him for being wicked. No, on the contrary, Pharaoh chose to harden his own heart and God allowed him to remain that way and become more hardened yet.

Paul's point in Romans 9:18 can be summed up as follows: God chooses people for service and whoever submits to God's service shall receive mercy, but whoever rejects His service shall be hardened. God is not out to get anybody; He is willing to show mercy to all, but His righteousness requires He allow all to make their own choice.

9- A warning about falsely accusing God.

Romans 9:19-20

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

²⁰ But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, "Why have you made me like this?"

Based on what he has just stated about mercy and hardening, Paul anticipates someone objecting and claiming God was being unfair when finding fault with someone whom He himself has hardened. Such would indeed be unfair if the individual had no part in the hardening of their own heart, but as the example of Pharaoh demonstrates when a man's heart is hardened he is personally responsible.

Paul states that men will try to excuse their personal responsibility by arguing, "Who can resist His will?" In other words, "God made me do it!"

Neither Pharaoh nor Israel, nor any man or woman alive today can blame God and excuse themselves from personal guilt. Paul's follow up question is essentially, "Who do you, as a mere man, think you are in bringing an accusation against God?" Man has no right to accuse God of making him sin. God is not the father of sin, nor does he force any man to sin, though He will allow man to become hardened to sin if man so chooses.

Paul asks another question, “Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, “Why have you made me like this?” Here is Paul’s point: It is wrong for man to accuse God of causing him to sin, and it is also wrong for man to become angry with God when he is punished for the sins he chose to commit.

10- From the same lump

Romans 9:21

²¹ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

Calvinists often quote Romans 9:21 in defense of their doctrine of Unconditional Election and claim that “the same lump” is all of humanity, and that from humanity God makes two kinds of vessels: one for salvation and another for destruction.

The glaring problem with Calvinism’s interpretation of Romans 9:21 is that the passage does not state one vessel was made for salvation and the other for damnation. Gareth Reese is correct when he states, “A vessel is honored or dishonored by the use to which it is put.” To state it another way, choosing one vessel for a great purposes and another for menial purposes is what is under consideration; not salvation and damnation.

Paul’s statement in verse 21 is a summation of all the examples he has called to attention up to this point. Isaac was chosen for great service, while Ishmael was to be used for lesser service (they were not chosen for salvation and damnation). Jacob was chosen for special service while Esau was chosen for lesser service (again, they were not chosen for salvation and damnation). Pharaoh was chosen for great service and whether it was honorable (with mercy) or dishonorable (with hardening) was up to him (salvation and destruction were not predetermined with the choosing for service). “From the same lump” (all humanity) God had the right to choose whomever He wanted for matters of great service without being unfair to those used for lesser service.

11- Mercy and Wrath

Romans 9:22-24

What if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴ even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

Based on the fact that God can make two different types of vessels from the same lump (vs. 21), Paul now demonstrates how God chose two groups from the same nation for two different services. From the same lump of clay (Israel) there were two different vessels that had formed – Spiritual Israel (the remnant vs. 6) and Physical Israel.

For a long time God had wanted to destroy physical Israel because of her rebellion, idolatry, and disobedience, and demonstrate through her the power of His wrath, yet He endured with much longsuffering so that he might make known the riches of His glory through the vessel of mercy – the remnant (vs. 6, 27).

There are three important points to keep in mind:

- 1- Israel, like Pharaoh, had a choice as to how God would deal with her.

Jeremiah 18:7-12

7 The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, 8 if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. 9 And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, 10 if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it. 11 "Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD: "Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good."' 12 And they said, "That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart."

- 2- In Romans 9:22 when the Bible speaks of “the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”, the word “prepared” is a direct reflexive middle and should be translated “That prepared themselves for destruction.” Paul’s point was that Israel by choice had become the object of God’s wrath while the remnant that had remained faithful would receive mercy.
- 3- Vs. 24 - Paul includes himself and the Roman brethren– “even us” as part of the vessels of mercy which had been prepared beforehand. Here is Paul’s point: The church was prepared by God and now Paul and the other Christians could be part of the church – God’s vessel of mercy – by receiving the call of the gospel.

Romans 1:6-7 (NKJV)

6 among whom you also are **the called** of Jesus Christ;

7 To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, **called to be saints**: ...

Romans 8:28-30 (NKJV)

*28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are **the called** according to His purpose.*

29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

*30 Moreover whom He predestined, **these He also called**; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

Question: How did He call them?

Answer: He called them thru the preaching of the gospel – although few accepted the invitation.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

13 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because **God** from the beginning **chose you for salvation** through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,

14 to which **He called you by our gospel**, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said:

Matthew 22:14

14 "For many are called, but few are chosen."

The gospel called out to "*every creature*" of "*every nation*" (Mk 16:15), but only a few answered the call.

Notice carefully in Rom 9:24 that God "*called*" people "***not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.***"

- ▶ The word "*called*" is the Greek word *kalevw*.
- ▶ The word "*of*" is the Greek *ejk* which means "*out of*" or "*from.*"

There is a Greek word which takes both *ejk* and *kalevw* and puts them together – *ejkklhsiva* which is translated "church."

ejkklhsiva means "*the called out.*"

Members of the church have been "*called out*" of the Jewish nation and from gentile nations into a spiritual nation – the spiritual Israel.

12- God's Purpose All Along

Romans 9:25-29

As He says also in Hosea:

"I will call them My people, who were not My people,
And her beloved, who was not beloved."

²⁶ "And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them,
'You *are* not My people,'
There they shall be called sons of the living God."

²⁷ Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel:

"Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea,
The remnant will be saved.

²⁸ For He will finish the work and cut *it* short in righteousness,
Because the LORD will make a short work upon the earth."

²⁹ And as Isaiah said before:

"Unless the LORD of Sabbath had left us a seed,
We would have become like Sodom,
And we would have been made like Gomorrah."

Paul quotes from both Hosea and Isaiah to demonstrate God's plan had always been to bring about the remnant (the church) and the Seed (Christ) through the nation of Israel. Israel had been chosen for service, not salvation. Once Israel had performed her service of bringing the Savior into the world (and through Him the church), she would receive the destruction for which she had fitted herself.

In the end, God had been more than fair in His dealings with physical Israel and her destruction was her own fault. The church now stands as the remnant and all the earth is being called to Christ through it.

Acts 10:34-35

34 Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that **God shows no partiality.**

35 But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.

The question is: Will you receive the call of the Gospel and submit to Christ by obedience to the Gospel?

All men must hear the Gospel – Romans 10:17.

All men must believe that Jesus is the Son of God – John 3:16

All men must repent of their sins – Acts 2:38

All men must confess that Jesus is the Son of God – Matthew 10:32/Acts 8:37

All men must be baptized in water for the remission of sin – Acts 2:38/Acts 22:16

If you will obey these steps, the Lord will add you to His church – the remnant – Acts 2:41, 47.