

Objections to Sovereign Grace

Romans 9:14-23

You believe that God chooses some people for salvation before they are even born!?

And, at the same time, he chooses to not save others?!

I knew you Presbyterians believed some crazy stuff.

Your ideas are dangerous. You make God out to be something terrible.

I cannot believe in what you teach. I believe in a God who loves all people equally.

The Bible cannot actually say what you think it says.

Why would we even need to share the gospel with people, if God is going to save or not save anyway?

You teach a gospel of hate.

I remain Presbyterian, and a believer in Sovereign Grace, simply because I believe that it is clearly taught in Scripture. And I am bound to accept and embrace whatever is taught in Scripture. I do not get to pick and choose what I like and don't like.

But even though, at first, I did not like the doctrines of Sovereign Grace. And even to this day, there are twinges in my heart against it, by and large, I have grown to delight in and depend upon God's Sovereign electing love every day of my life.

I understand all the accusations against the doctrine. I have had them myself. But I also feel a deep sadness that so many limit the glory of God's saving love. They talk about God's love. And I believe that they mean what they say. But there is so much more to God's love that they cannot see. They attack predestination like it is some idea devised by men, rather than glorious truth revealed to men by a gracious God.

We are studying Romans. We are in Romans 9. And what we find are not the words of men. They are God's Word spoken through the Apostle Paul. Paul anticipates the questions that his readers will have. And so, he raises the objections himself. Does election make God unjust? How can God still hold men accountable?

After dealing with these objections, Paul also touches on the question of "Why?". Why would God save this way?

Read Romans 9:14-23.

14 What shall we say then?
 Is there injustice on God's part?
 By no means!

Injustice is unrighteousness.

In chapter 1, Paul argued that God's wrath is being poured out against all the unrighteousness of men. If God himself were unrighteous, then he would have no grounds for judging men in their unrighteousness. How does Paul know that God is NOT unjust? Paul does not put God on trial with himself as judge. This is what so many do in our day. They begin with their own ideas of justice, and then using their own standard, evaluate God. Paul's approach is very different. He derives his understanding of justice from God's Word. God is the standard of justice. What he does IS just?

ESV **Deuteronomy 32:4** "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

As Paul deals with human objections to Unconditional Election, he is careful to never put God on the stand to be tried. Paul assumes at the very beginning: There is no way that God is unjust. He is the very essence of justice. We must learn what it means to be just from God's dealings with men. Paul chooses two men: Moses and Pharaoh to see how God deals with each of them very differently.

Paul begins with Moses.

Moses is the example of an individual upon whom God has had sovereign mercy.

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

It is likely that there was no other one person in all the OT that God spoke more directly and more frequently with than Moses. The Bible says that God spoke to him as one speaks to another person – face to face.

In one of these face to face, conversations, God explicitly spoke the words of v. 15. If God did not explicitly tell Moses this, he would not have known. God decides to

whom he gives mercy and compassion. If He wants to give compassion, He gives compassion. But if He does not want to give compassion, He does not give compassion.

These words are really the conclusion of a larger interaction between Moses and God. While Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the 10 Commandments, Aaron and the people were down at the base of the mountain making a golden calf to worship. As a result 3,000 Israelites are put to death.

Soon after this, God comes to Moses and tells him that he is not going with Israel to the Promised Land. God is angry with Israel for her idolatry. And if he were to go with them, he would most likely consume them along the way. Moses tells this to the people, and they seem genuinely sorrowful. As a sign of their mourning, they strip themselves of all their jewelry.

God continues to want to meet with Moses, but he does not really want to be near the rest of the Israelites, so Moses sets up a tent far outside of the rest of the camp. And there God meets with Moses.

11 Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face,
as a man speaks to his friend.

Moses tells God that he wants assurance that God will indeed go with him as he leads the people to the Promised Land. God promises to Moses to go with him and to give him "rest". Rest is short hand for salvation.

Moses then repeats to God that salvation would be empty if God did not go with them. It is the presence of God, with his people that makes them distinct from the other peoples on the face of the earth.

God then gives Moses some really wonderful words of assurance:

17 And the LORD said to Moses,
"This very thing that you have spoken I will do,
for you have found favor in my sight,
and
I know you by name."

What more could Moses ask for?

18 Moses said,

"Please show me your glory."

What could be more glorious than knowing that God will give you his presence and his rest?

Answer: the knowledge that God is doing this only as an act of his sovereign mercy.

19 And he said,
"I will make all my goodness pass before you
and
will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'
And
I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,
and
will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

Moses wanted more. And this is what God gives to him. Rather than God's Sovereign Grace being a dark doctrine of which we should be ashamed, and keep hidden, this doctrine is a deeper and more glorious revelation of God's saving love. The glory of God's saving grace is that it is freely given. It is not given to all generally. It is given to some and not to others.

As those who have received salvation, we are required to be gracious to everyone. We do not get to choose whether or not we will extend grace. But this is because our love is given in thankfulness for the love that we have freely received.

But God's love is different. He is not obligated to love anyone. He is indebted to no one. All men, fallen in Adam, are guilty and deserving of eternal punishment. God would be entirely just to condemn all men to an eternal hell. That God does not do this is entirely of grace. But, for God to extend grace to one person, does not obligate him to extend the same grace to every person.

Grace is not given on the basis of equality. If there are 10 criminals rotting in jail, and God chooses to free one of them, he is not then required to free all 10. God can, and does, choose to extend mercy upon some, while also choosing NOT to extend mercy to others.

To say that God is NOT free to do this goes directly against His own statement to Moses, and dulls the shine of God's saving love. Many people think that Sovereign

Grace is a mark against God's character. Just the opposite; God's character shines brightest because of Sovereign Grace.

Turn back to Romans 9:16. Paul gives us his conclusion from what God revealed to Moses.

16 So then
 it depends
 not on human will
 or
 exertion,
 but
 on God,
 who has mercy.

"It" refers to salvation, entering God's rest, experiencing God's presence as you enter the Promised Land, which is itself a picture of the New Heavens and New Earth.

The experience of your eternal salvation depends NOT on your own will power or strength. It depends upon God, who has mercy.

The "human will" refers to one's inner desire. "Exertion" refers to one's strength to carrying out the inner desire. Together they refer to the totality of what man is capable of accomplishing.

Paul is not saying that human will and exertion are meaningless. They are simply not that upon which salvation depends. Those who have received mercy exert effort to know and love God. But no one exerts such effort without having received mercy. Our choosing God is the fruit of God's choosing us. Our living for God is the fruit of God's working in us.

Moses is Paul's example of Sovereign Mercy.

Pharaoh is Paul's example of Sovereign Hardening.

17 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."

Paul is quoting from Exodus 9:16.

Exodus 9 is right in the middle of the Ten Plagues that God brings upon Egypt.
We are picking up the story in the 5th plague.
Turn back to Exodus 9.

Exodus 9:1-11

Then the LORD said to Moses,
"Go in to Pharaoh and say to him,
'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews,
"Let my people go, that they may serve me.

God gives to Pharaoh a very clear command: Let my people go. God treats Pharaoh as a responsible human being. And God attaches a warning to his command:

2 For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them,
3 behold,
the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague
upon your livestock that are in the field,
the horses,
the donkeys,
the camels,
the herds,
and the flocks.

4 But
the LORD will make a distinction
between the livestock of Israel
and
the livestock of Egypt,
so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel
shall die."''

There is an implied blessing if Pharaoh obeys the command: your livestock will go on living. But there is an explicit punishment for not obeying: severe plague on the livestock. There is not even a hint of fatalism in the text. Fatalism would say something like: "Whether you obey me or not, what will be will be."

5 And the LORD set a time, saying,
"Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land."

6 And the next day the LORD did this thing.
All the livestock of the Egyptians died,
but
not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died.

Everything happens just as God warned would happen. God does not make idol threats.

7 And Pharaoh sent,
and behold,
not one of the livestock of Israel was dead.
But
the heart of Pharaoh was hardened,
and he did not let the people go.

Pharaoh sends a delegation to find out if the livestock of Israel are dying like the livestock of the Egyptians. He finds out that they are doing just fine.

Here we begin to see God's decision to NOT give Sovereign Mercy, but instead to Sovereignly harden Pharaoh's heart. Rather than admitting that the God of Israel is the true God and submitting his own heart to Him, Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" and because of that hardening, he refused to let the people go. The implication is that had God not "hardened" Pharaoh, he would have let the people go. Instead, the plagues continue: Boils on men and animals.

These boils cause the men to cry out in agony. But they do not bring them to repentance. Why not?

12 But
the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh,
and he did not listen to them,
as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Here we are told that the LORD is the one doing the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. But even while God is hardening Pharaoh's heart, he is simultaneously commanding Pharaoh to "Let his people go."

13 Then the LORD said to Moses,
"Rise up early in the morning
and present yourself before Pharaoh
and say to him,

'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews,
"Let my people go, that they may serve me.

14 For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself,¹
and on your servants
and your people,
so that you may know that there is none like me in all the
earth.

God gives the same command again to Pharaoh: Let my people go.
And he gives another warning to Pharaoh if he does not comply.

Up until now, God has dealt with Pharaoh on a personal level. God is clearly stronger than Pharaoh and is able to control nature. But in verse 15, God reveals himself to Pharaoh as the sovereign God of the Universe. Rather than Pharaoh simply being a stubborn enemy, God now reveals to Pharaoh that he is serving the purpose for which God intended.

15 For by now
I could have put out my hand
and
struck you and your people with pestilence,
and you would have been cut off from the earth.

God says, "Had I wanted, you would be dead by now."

Pharaoh only continues to draw breath because God wants him to draw breath. Instead of Pharaoh making salvation difficult, he is really serving God's own purposes to show the wonder of salvation.

16 But for this purpose
I have raised you up,
to show you my power,
so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.

This is the verse that Paul quotes in Romans 9:17.

"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."

Instead of Pharaoh posing a problem for God, God has raised him up for the very purpose he is serving. What is that purpose? For God to display his awesome power and that God's name might be known throughout the earth. You mean God was not trying to save Pharaoh? Not according to the text. You mean it was not ever God's intention to save Pharaoh? Not according to the Scripture – God's own testimony about the situation.

Paul combines God's Words to Moses and God's Words to Pharaoh and then comes to his conclusion:

18 So then
 he has mercy on whomever he wills,
 and
 he hardens whomever he wills.

Paul's conclusion is that God is free to choose whether he extends mercy or whether he hardens an individual.

To "harden" means to make stubborn. It is used Thirteen times in the book of Exodus. In every case we are told either, "The LORD hardened" OR "Pharaoh was hardened, as the LORD said". God never takes a good man and makes him wicked. But he does justly harden people in their wickedness. The doctrine of election ought to humble us.

Think for a moment about the two men that Paul gives as examples: Moses and Pharaoh. How would you describe Moses? How would you describe Pharaoh? Do you think of Moses as good? And do you think of Pharaoh as bad?

The Bible tells us that left to themselves, Pharaoh was not any worse than Moses. Moses was not a better man than Pharaoh, or less of a sinner. At least not to begin with. Moses would become a godly man. He would become a humble man. But he did not make himself that way. Moses was the product of God's having mercy upon him.

God could have chosen to have mercy upon Pharaoh. And he could have hardened Moses in his stubbornness. The story could have been different had God wanted it to be different. It is the way it is because God chose to have mercy upon Moses. The same is true for you. Why are you being saved while others are not? Why have you embraced Christ while others have not? Why do you fight against your sin while others do not? Only one answer fully displays the glory of God: God has chosen to have mercy upon you.

This leads us to the 2nd objection:

19 You will say to me then,
"Why does he still find fault?

For who can resist his will?"

How in the world does God find fault with Pharaoh when it is God who was hardening Pharaoh? It is not as if Pharaoh is strong enough to overcome God's powerful hardening, is he? No, he is not. No man can overcome the will of God. God can overcome man's will. But man cannot overcome God's will. There can only be one absolutely sovereign will in the universe.

So, how can God judge the person that he is hardening? Rather than explain "how", Paul basically says, "He can!" This is like a mom with their child saying, "Because I said so..."

Believe in God's Sovereign Grace. But never use Sovereign Grace to minimize your accountability and responsibility before God. Man is always accountable to God and rightly judged for his sin. The Bible never uses God's sovereignty to minimize man's responsibility. Man is rightly judged because his actions accurately reflect the desires of his heart.

Paul's answer does not answer "how" man is still accountable. It merely assumes that man is still accountable. I believe that there is benefit to trying to understand the how. D.A. Carson has a wonderful book called, "Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility" that I highly recommend to anyone wanting to dig deeper in this area.

But if your understanding of human freedom minimizes Sovereign Grace, then your understanding of human freedom needs revising. To think that man's freedom limits God's freedom is revolting to Scripture, and should be to us as well.

This would have been the perfect time for Paul to say, "Wait a minute! You misunderstood me. Man has a free will that God cannot violate. God has determined to limit his own sovereignty so that man could be absolutely free." If there was a place in Scripture for Paul to back pedal, it would be here. But He does no such thing.

It is rather shocking that Paul does not even feel the need to explain the grounds for man's responsibility. Listen to his answer to the objection:

20 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?"

21 Has the potter no right over the clay,
to make out of the same lump

one vessel for honored use
and
another for dishonorable use?

If you are following what Paul is saying, this is like a slap in the face. If you think that you can challenge God, you need to remember who you are. You are dust. Paul doubles down and simply says: God is God and you are not! Paul uses the illustration of the potter making different types of vessels out of the same lump of clay. This is a common illustration used both in Isaiah and Jeremiah.

There are two things you need to know about the clay. The first is that there is only one lump. That is essential to the illustration. The distinction of honorable and dishonorable cannot be found in the clay itself. It is only in the will of the Potter. The second thing you need to know is that the lump of clay is evil to start. Both Moses and Pharaoh were dead in sin. Not one person since the Fall of Adam is good. All alike are evil.

God doesn't take good clay and make it evil. That would make God the author of evil, which he is not. But he does take evil clay and choose to have mercy on some while hardening others.

Paul is not so much interested in answering our curiosities. But he does ask the question, "Why?" God considers it more important that you understand God's purpose in Sovereign Grace than your being able to work out all the nuances of human responsibility.

22 What if God,
 desiring to show his wrath
 and
 to make known his power,
 has endured with much patience vessels of wrath
 prepared for destruction,
23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy,
 which he has prepared beforehand for glory-

What is Paul saying here?

Two things:

First, even though God intends for some people to experience eternal wrath, he does not judge them immediately. Instead, he endures their rebellion with patience.

And secondly, he does this to make known to his objects of mercy the riches of his glory.

What God is doing in those he is hardening is communicating to his objects of mercy the riches of mercy. Part of knowing the riches of mercy is understanding it in contrast with those who are hardened and finally judged to an eternal hell.

If God had extended mercy to everyone equally, then we would never really understand that it was mercy that brought us to glory.

When This Passing World is Done... Robert Murray McCheyne, a hymn:

2 When I hear the wicked call
on the rocks and hills to fall,
when I see them start and shrink
on the fiery deluge brink,
then, Lord, shall I fully know,
not till then, how much I owe.

5 Chosen not for good in me,
wakened up from wrath to flee,
hidden in the Savior's side,
by the Spirit sanctified,

Where does all this leave you today?

1. Sovereign election does not change the established truth that all who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. Whosoever comes to Jesus, he will never cast out.
 - a. If you are here today and have never really placed your faith in Jesus Christ, do so today. As we sing the final hymn. When you get home. Find a quiet place and seek God in prayer. Acknowledge your sin. Seek God's grace to hate your sin. Ask him for mercy to turn from your sin. Rely upon mercy alone, in Christ alone, to forgive and cleanse you from all your sin. And pursue after Jesus with all your heart.
2. If you are coming, it is only because of Sovereign Grace. God has bestowed, and is bestowing, his saving love upon you.

- a. Have confidence in this love rather than in yourself. Especially, in difficult times.
 - b. Expand and deepen your understanding of grace. God is not simply helping those who help themselves. God is saving those who cannot help themselves.
 - c. Do not let yourself think: I did this, and therefore am saved.
 - d. Or, I did this and therefore so and so was saved.
 - e. You and I are instruments in the hands of the One true giver of Sovereign Grace.
3. In those who are currently disobedient to the truth, cry out to God to extend to them Sovereign Grace
- a. Acknowledge that God would be just to not extend grace.
 - b. Plead with him to extend grace, believing that even your prayers are the fruit of God's love working in your heart.
 - c. As long as people draw breath, there is hope that God will have mercy.
 - i. I wonder what people thought of the thief on the cross even moments before Jesus called him to salvation. It is likely that so many who knew him believed him to be a lost cause. Jesus is the one who sovereignly calls. Do not lose hope.