

I threw my Gideon New Testament against my bedroom wall, when I was ten years old, and screamed, “I don’t believe in God!” I no longer know why I did that. I was angry, and God was the easy target. I wonder how often people are angry at God, because life isn’t working the way they think it should work. It’s a lot easier to throw your New Testament against the wall than to ponder, maybe for years, the purpose God has in the pain your feel.

I have been reading a nifty little book called *Fighting the Noonday Devil* by R. R. Reno. He explains why we might be so quick to blame God, when life isn’t working the way we think it should work. “Most of us just want to be left alone so that we can get on with our lives. Most of us want to be safe. We want to find a cocoon, a spiritually, psychologically, economically, and physically gated community in which to live without danger and disturbance. The carefree life . . . is our cultural ideal.” (4-5)

And by all means keep God out! I don’t mean atheists. There aren’t many real atheists around. I mean the functional atheists, who live as if there were no God. They say they are spiritual but not religious. They say that faith is a private matter, that religion is okay in its place. But God won’t leave us alone. Since we won’t come to Him, He comes to us like a thief in the night. He breaks down the gate of our “gated community” and allows hard and harsh realities to park themselves at our front door and transgress on our tranquility. When life makes you angry, when God makes you angry, it’s a sign that you should pay attention. It is telling you something about yourself that you need to know and most likely need to change.

Election

Life didn’t work the way the Apostle Paul thought it should work, and it caused him great sadness. The majority of his Jewish kinsmen refused to believe that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah of Israel. That was hard enough, but his Jewish kinsmen were the elect, the chosen people of God. Paul was not just sad; he was facing a theological problem so big that it shook him to his core. How could God’s elect turn away from the eternal purpose of their election?

That’s why he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for his brothers. That’s what moved him to say, **I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race.** It made Paul consider the unthinkable: Had God’s purpose failed? Paul’s answer to that question in Romans 9-11 takes us deep into the mystery and majesty of the doctrine of election.

Here is a brief summary of where our understanding of election stands after the last two sermons on Romans 9:1-13. Psalm 33:11 says: **The plans of the Lord stand firm forever; the purposes of his heart through all generations.** But how does God achieve His purpose in our world? He does it by the method of election.

God chooses one person instead of another person. He chose Abraham instead of anyone else on earth. He chose Abraham’s son, Isaac, instead of Abraham’s son, Ishmael. He chose Isaac’s son, Jacob, instead of Isaac’s son, Esau. After that, God chose the descendants of Jacob, Israel, and no other to carry forward God’s purpose in the world.

But they were such unpromising people? Abraham had feet of clay at times. Isaac comes across as ordinary as dirt, and his favoritism toward his son, Esau, had disastrous consequences in his family. Jacob on any reading of Genesis was a stinker. The Old Testament bears witness that Israel was a recalcitrant lot. God didn’t choose those three

men or that nation because of their superior moral character. So, why choose them?

Paul answered in Romans 9:11b-12a: God chose such unpromising people **in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls.** God elects unpromising people in order to demonstrate that the success of His purpose depends on Him, and not on the people he chooses.

That raises another question. What is God's purpose? God's purpose, as we learned last Sunday in Genesis 28:14 was that **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you, Jacob, and your offspring.** The scripture we read today will enrich the meaning of that purpose. So, let's get to it in Romans 9:14-18.

The Mercy of God

This passage opens with a concession to reality. Not everyone likes God's method of election. Paul acknowledged one reason for that dislike in verse 14. **What then shall we say? Is God unjust?** Is preferring one person over another really right? What right does God have to prefer one person to another? Everyone is equal. Individual freedom must be respected. Everyone deserves an equal opportunity. It's unfair to exclude people. You can almost feel righteous indignation getting up a head of steam in that objection.

Before we read Paul's answer let me get past your defenses just a little by asking you to imagine something. You should ask yourself the question sometime: "If I had all power on earth, how would I put right what has gone wrong with humanity without violating human freedom?" As you ponder what you would do with your new omnipotence to solve the world's problems, you should keep in mind how God does it.

His method was to choose three men and the community that issued from that third man and hammer into their heads and hearts for 2000 years what kind of God He is and then for another 2000 years (so far) include more and more of the human family in that community of faith.

As you think about that, you may be slower to ask, **is God unjust?** The apostle responded to that question with a blunt denial. **Is God unjust? Not at all!** In the next breath he explained himself, and his explanation takes us deeper into the doctrine of election. The heart of his explanation is a quotation from Exodus 33:19, which "comes closer than anywhere else in the Jewish scriptures to revealing the innermost nature of God." (James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16*, 562)

Verse 15 quotes that verse where God said to Moses: **"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."** If you are questioning the justice of God, because He chooses one person instead of another and one nation instead of any other, would it take the edge off your question to know that God does that to extend mercy to the entire human family?

You may say, "It doesn't feel merciful; it feels arbitrary." I say that whatever it feels like to our egalitarian habits, it is merciful, because it's the way God makes sure that mercy will prevail in this world. So, does it feel arbitrary? It could. Does it feel hard? It might. Before you give in to those tricky feelings, you might remember something that C. S. Lewis said that has a bearing on this. "The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion is our liberation." (*Surprised by Joy*,)

The apostle made the same point in the very next verse. **It (God's purpose) does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's arbitrary choices.** It doesn't say that, does it? It says: **It (God's purpose) does not, therefore, depend on**

man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. Paul said almost the same thing in verses 11-12: **God's purpose in election will stand: not by works but by him who calls.** God uses the method of election to demonstrate that the success of His purpose depends on Him, and not on the people he chooses. In particular, it depends on the kind of God He is, and the biblical revelation says that His "innermost nature" is mercy.

Pharaoh and the Question of Justice

In verse 17 the apostle gave another example of how God's purpose does not depend on man's desire or effort. Let me set the verse up for you. God's chosen people, Israel, were in an impossible situation. They were slaves in Egypt. God wanted to show them mercy; He wanted to set them free. But how? By another, completely unexpected act of election!

Verse 17 refers to Exodus 9:16. **For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up."** Do you think it is a stretch for me to say that God elected Pharaoh to serve God's purpose?" More than once the Bible speaks about some pagan king whom God chose to use for a holy purpose. No one gave that idea a more solid basis than Jesus. Pilate said to Him, **"Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"** to which **Jesus answered, "You have no power over me that was not given to you from above."** – John 19:10-11.

And what was God's purpose in choosing Pharaoh? Verse 17: it was **"that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."** **In all the earth?** That seems like a long way from choosing Jacob and not Esau. Election is not God's unfair way of excluding people. It is God's merciful way of including **all the earth** in His purpose of blessing all the nations on earth.

And He does it in the most unpromising circumstances (slavery in Egypt), and He uses the most unpromising person to do it (the Pharaoh of Egypt) in order to demonstrate that His purpose **does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.**

Heads of state, who strut around with the fate of millions in their hands, are prone to forget who put them there; and the One who put them there might just choose to display His power in them in order that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Let them consider Pharaoh of old and tremble. I'll say more about this next Sunday.

The doctrine of election means that God comes barging into human life and making unmistakable contact with real people; and when He does that, anything can happen, because God is in control. He has a merciful purpose, and He is going to achieve His purpose, and the human mess will not thwart it.

Parting Company

Verse 18 introduces the dark side of election. **Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.** O great apostle to the Gentiles, I was doing so well until you said that. God who has mercy on sinners also hardens sinners. I'd like to defer that difficult idea till next Sunday and then give it our full attention.

Now is a good time to take a moment to show you how my understanding of election – which is not mine only – parts company with the understanding of election I grew up with, and with which you may be familiar.

Three ideas express the familiar understanding. First, God's act of election took place before God created the world. Second, the object of election was the individual. Third, the purpose of election was to determine who will be saved and who will be damned at the final judgment.

The different understanding of election that I propose to you goes like this. First, God's act of election takes place within history. Second, the object of election is the community of faith that began with Abraham. Third, the purpose of election is for that community to embody and carry forward God's purpose in the world. His purpose is to bless all the nations of the earth through Jesus Christ.

I believe this understanding of election is truer to the biblical revelation and less dependent on theological speculation.

I believe this understanding will make the doctrine of election a life-giving power in the Church that teaches us to look for God to act in unpromising circumstances.

I believe that this understanding rescues the Church from the perception that it is nothing more than a religious institution. It recovers the divine character of the Church as the flesh and blood organism, which embodies and carries forward God's purpose in the world in irresistible and surprising ways.

A Startling Possibility

That understanding of election has set in motion a train of thought I'd like to share with you. One of the overwhelming problems that our government faces today is illegal immigration. It calls into question either the seriousness or the justice of our immigration laws. What I am about to say does not deny the necessity of dealing with this huge challenge to our national integrity.

But what if the presence of millions of illegal Hispanics in this country reflected a strategy of divine election? What if the Chess Master of Nations were pleased for these illegal millions to be the vanguard of a revival of Christianity in the United States? It's not as far-fetched as you might think.

The handful of Christian Jews in Acts 11, who told Gentiles about Jesus, were fringe people at best, rabble-rousers at worst in the eyes of the Mother Church in Jerusalem. But they became the base church for the Apostle Paul, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire. When St. Patrick was taken as a slave to Ireland, who knew that he would not only be instrumental in the conversion of Ireland, but that he would also send Irish missionaries across Western Europe? Who knew that freed slaves in Nova Scotia and Jamaica would be repatriated to Sierra Leone in the early 1800s and form a powerful church that sent missionaries to Kenya on the other side of Africa?

Why shouldn't this mass migration of illegal immigrants into the American Republic be another stealth move of divine election? You say, "But it's illegal. God wouldn't use what's illegal to further His purpose!" He just might in order to demonstrate that the success of His purpose depends on Him, and not on the people he chooses.

You say to me, "You're just guessing about Hispanics. You don't really know if their presence in this country is a strategy of divine election." You're right: I don't know. But the understanding of election I am proposing to you wakens us to be on the lookout for the action of God in surprising ways. He's not off playing golf on the other side of the universe. He has a purpose, and He is going to achieve His purpose, and the human mess will not thwart it. In fact, it will serve his purpose of mercy.