

# The Fame of His Name and the Freedom of Mercy

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By John Piper

## Romans 9:14-18

**14** What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

**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.***"

**16** So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

**17** For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "***FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.***"

**18** So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

We pick up where we left off three weeks ago. Let's review what we saw in **Romans 9:14-16**. The question of God's justice was raised in verse 14 because Paul taught in **Romans 9:6-13** that God chooses - elects - unconditionally who will believe and undeservingly be saved, and who will rebel and deservingly perish. The terrible reality of perishing people had been raised in verse 3 where Paul was grieving over his Jewish kinsmen who, as he says, are "cursed and cut off from Christ." How can God's word and covenant with Israel stand if so many individual Israelites are unbelieving and therefore perishing?

Paul answers in verse 6 that not all those who belong physically to Israel are truly Israel. Then he explains with the examples of Isaac and Ishmael, on the one hand, and Jacob and Esau, on the other hand, that within Israel there has been a remnant "chosen by grace" (**Romans 11:5**). Isaac not Ishmael was chosen. Jacob not Esau was chosen. That's Paul's explanation of why there were so many of his kinsmen who were unbelieving and therefore accursed and cut off from Christ. It was ultimately owing to God's free and unconditional election of some and not others.

So Paul makes this explicit in **Romans 9:11-13**. "**Though they [Jacob and Esau] were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad [this is where we see the unconditionality] - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call - 12 she [Rebecca] was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'** **13 As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'**" God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. And he did this before they were born or had done anything good or evil. That's what we mean by unconditional election.

Paul knew that in his day and ours people would stumble over this. People would say that God is unjust - unrighteous - to choose freely and unconditionally

who would believe and be undeservingly saved and who would rebel and deservingly perish. So he poses the question that he has, no doubt, heard many times in response to his teaching. He asks in verse 14, "**What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?**" And he answers: "**May it never be!**" God is not unjust in unconditional election.

Why not? That is what we began to talk about three weeks ago, starting with verses 15-16. I'll try to sum it up and add the part I promised. The part we looked at last time was how the quote from **Exodus 33:19** functions in verse 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.'**" This is given as an argument for God's justice or righteousness in unconditional election. "**There is no unrighteousness with God is there? May it never be! FOR, God says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'**" How does that argument work?

### **The First Key: God's Glory Includes His Absolute Freedom in Election**

The context of **Exodus 33:19** is all important. This statement of the freedom of God in mercy is given by Moses as an expression and manifestation of God's name, his character, his glory. (We saw that last time.) That's why Paul chose to cite what looks like a simple restatement of the problem: he has mercy on whom he wills. He is free and not decisively constrained by anything outside himself. In the context, this freedom is shown to be the very essence of what it means to be God. It is an expression of his name: Yahweh: I am who I am. I have mercy on whom I have mercy. That is my name. That is my glory. That is what it means to be God.

### **The Second Key: The Essence of God's Righteousness Is His Commitment to Uphold and Display the Infinite Value of His Glory and His Name**

That was one key to understanding Paul's argument for God's righteousness in the freedom of election. The other key is Paul's understanding of God's righteousness. Last time I simply gave you that understanding and promised I would give some support this time. I said, "God's righteousness is essentially his unswerving allegiance to his own name - his own glory. God is righteous to the degree that he upholds and displays the honor of his name. He is righteous when he values most what is most valuable, and what is most valuable is his own glory." Now, is this the way Paul understands the essence of God's righteousness? Yes. One place to see this is **Romans 3:23-25**. "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**" Notice that sin is defined in relation to the glory of God. Sin belittles the glory of God. It makes God look less valuable by desiring something else more. Then Paul describes God's remedy for that derision of his glory. Verse 24: "**. . . and [they] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.**" What we see here is that God sent Jesus to die ("by his blood"), and that by dying the righteousness of God could be vindicated and his anger could be propitiated and

sinners who had belittled God's glory could be justified by faith alone. Why did God's righteousness need to be vindicated in this way? Because (v. 25b) he had passed over sins. That is, he had acted as though the derision of his glory didn't matter, and thus his righteousness, his allegiance to that glory, is called into question. He acted as though his glory was of little worth. But it is of infinite worth. And God would be untrue, he would be unrighteous, not to uphold and display the true value of his glory. Therefore, in order to justify sinners (like us!) who belittle his glory, and yet not himself belittle his own glory (in acting as though it didn't matter), he shows the infinite value of his glory by vindicating it with the death of his own Son who died for his Father's glory (**John 12:27-28**).

Therefore, what **Romans 3:23-25** shows (as well as 3:1-8 and other places) is that God's righteousness is, at its essence, God's unswerving allegiance to the infinite value of his own glory - his own name. It's his unwavering commitment to uphold and display his glory and his name.

### **Paul's Conclusion: There Is No Unrighteousness with God in Unconditional Election**

Now with these two keys: we open Paul's argument. The first key from the quotation of **Exodus 33:19** in **Romans 9:15** is that God's glory, his name, includes his absolute being and his absolute freedom in election. "**I am who I am.**" "**I have mercy on whom I have mercy.**" That is his glory, his name. That is what it means to be God.

The second key is that God's righteousness is his unwavering commitment always to uphold and display the infinite value of his glory and his name.

The conclusion that Paul draws is this: therefore there is no unrighteousness with God in unconditional election. When God acts in this way, choosing the beneficiaries of his mercy freely and without any constraint from human willing or human acting, he is upholding and displaying his name and his glory. And this is the very essence of his righteousness.

And so he restates the unconditionality of election in **Romans 9:16**: "**So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.**" God's ultimate choice of who will believe and undeservingly be saved, and who will rebel and deservingly perish, is not based on human volition or human behavior.

Then Paul turns to another Old Testament passage to give further support for his conviction. He cites **Exodus 9:16** in **Romans 9:17**. And then he states his conviction again in verse 18. Verse 18 says, "**So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.**" You can see how similar this is to verse 15, "**I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.**" But here the opposite of mercy is also mentioned, namely hardening. "**He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.**"

You see what Paul is doing here. He had said in **Romans 9:13** not only, "**Jacob I loved,**" but also, "**Esau I hated.**" One is chosen and the other is given over to become wicked. (See the [sermon from 12-8-02](#) and the context of **Romans 9:13** in **Malachi 1:4**, "wicked.") There are two sides to God's choosing, and verse 18 picks that up: "**He has mercy on whom He wills, and He hardens whom He wills.**" If the mercy is ultimately

unconditional, the hardening is ultimately unconditional. That's what verse 18 adds, simply repeating what verse 11 had said, "**Before they were born or had done anything good or evil,**" God chose who would be the beneficiary of his mercy and who would not.

Ultimately, God does not save or condemn because of constraints laid on him by the willing or doing of man. God is free. He acts according to his own wise purposes to uphold and display the fullness of his glory.

## **God Hardens Whom He Will**

To show from Scripture that God "**hardens whom he wills,**" Paul turns to the great old story of the Exodus from Egypt. And he chooses one verse from those 10 chapters, **Exodus 9:16**, and quotes it here in verse 17: "**For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.'**"

Why this verse from all the verses that he could have chosen that speak of hardening? Why choose one that does not even refer to hardening, and then draw out the conclusion: "**He hardens whom he wills**" (v. 18)? There are very profound reasons. They relate to God's freedom and to God's great global purposes of world evangelization. But that we will save for next week. I want to devote the entire message next week to going back with you to the story of the Exodus and seeing what the Old Testament teaches about the purpose of God in hardening Pharaoh. But to draw to a close this morning and move to the Lords' Supper, I want to step back, get the big picture and make some clarifying comments. Unconditional election does not mean that our final salvation or condemnation is unconditional.

## **Unconditional Election Does Not Conflict with Real Conditions**

It is by faith we are saved (**Romans 10:9**), and it is because of hard and impenitent hearts that we receive wrath and perish (**Romans 2:5**). There is a real condition that has to be met for justification - namely faith in Jesus Christ. And there are real conditions that have to be met for damnation, namely, hardness and unbelief. There is a real choice that we make which unites us with Christ so that we are clothed with his righteousness and have eternal life. And there is real choice that we make - in Adam and in ourselves - which is resistant to the truth and deserving of condemnation.

Unconditional election, which Paul teaches here, does not contradict any of that. What unconditional election teaches is that God chooses who will be in those two groups - who will believe and undeservingly be saved, and who will rebel and deservingly perish.

## **Implications**

There are two huge implications for us this morning.

**1) We should believe on Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and Treasure. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).** Don't be wiser than the word of God. Don't say: *"God chooses whomever he wills, I don't need to choose him."* The Bible says, **"Choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15).** Don't say, *"Why should I take hold of Christ if he takes hold of me?"* Rather say what Paul says, **"I take hold of Christ because he has taken hold of me" (Philippians 3:12).** Don't be wiser than the word of God. **"God has made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:20).** Humble yourself and turn to Christ and be saved.

**2) Beware, when you have believed, that you not boast, as if your believing were ultimately your own doing.** Instead be thankful and say with the apostle Paul, **"I thank God that from the heart I have become obedient to the teaching of Christ" (Romans 6:17).**

The Bible makes clear that God saves us in a way that excludes all boasting. Boasting is doubly excluded. It is excluded by the principle of faith and by the truth of unconditional election.

Boasting excluded by FAITH. **Romans 3:27, "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith."** Faith excludes boasting because it looks away from all human distinctives (including itself!) and receives free grace.

Boasting excluded by unconditional ELECTION. **1 Corinthians 1:27-29, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."** God's choosing, God's free and inscrutable election removes boasting from those who really feel its preciousness.

Therefore, believe on Christ, and when you do, thank him. Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.

