

IS IT OKAY FOR GOD TO BE SOVEREIGN?

ROMANS 9:14-23

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Two foundational principles:

1. Humility is the great requirement for studying the sovereignty of God.
2. Human responsibility is a vital biblical doctrine.

The context:

The theme of Romans 9-11 is God's faithfulness to His promise to save national Israel (see Rom 9:6; 11:1, 11). In these chapters Paul lists eight arguments that God's promises to save Israel had not failed. The second of those eight arguments (9:6-13) is that God's promise to save Israel had never included every single descendent of Abraham.

In Romans 9:14-23, Paul gets sidetracked from his main theme, as he feels compelled to address the issue of God's sovereignty.

The emphasis:

In 9:14-23, Paul emphasises a key attribute of God: *God's freedom to choose* (or as we more typically call it, *God's sovereignty*).

Exposition:

Rom 9:15 The assertion of God's freedom to save

For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION." (NASB)

Paul's argument:

When God chooses one utterly undeserving sinner over another, He is simply displaying a basic, foundational truth about Himself: His absolute freedom to choose (meaning, of course, absolute freedom within the context of His other attributes).

Romans 9:15 is not just a statement of something God has done, is doing, or will do. It is a statement of a basic, foundational fact about Him: God is a freely choosing God. Making, good, wise, *uninfluenced* choices is an essential expression of His glory.

The OT quote: Exodus 33:19

Two aspects of God's glory:

1. God is good

2. God has the right to make uninfluenced choices

God's glory isn't seen merely the fact that He gave Israel mercy. His glory is equally displayed in the fact that He had the right to choose to give them mercy or not to. God's will is free. That truth is a central characteristic of His deity.

Note: Some Christians view God's sovereignty almost as an evil or unfortunate thing. However, God spoke of His complete sovereignty and His absolute goodness in the same breath.

Further evidence: Ephesians 1:11

Conclusion:

God has the inalienable right to decide whether to give or withhold mercy. John Piper: *God's freedom from human "willing and running" is at the very heart of what it means to be the all-glorious God. (The Justification of God, 180)*

Romans 9:16 The result of God's freedom

So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. (NASB)

Doctrinal application:

The view that God elects based on looking ahead to see who will believe in Him runs completely counter-current to Romans 9:16. Paul argues that God's glory is displayed in the fact that He makes *uninfluenced* choices; therefore, election cannot be based on men's anticipated faith.

Thomas Schreiner:

This verse excludes in the clearest possible terms the notion that free will is the fundamental factor in divine election. (Romans, 508)

Note:

The relationship between Romans 9:16 and 9:11: *It does not depend on Jacob who wills or Jacob who runs; it depends on God who has mercy.*

Biblical examples of Romans 9:16 in action:

Acts 16:14 Acts 13:48

Conclusion:

Some argue that in the case of salvation, God suspends His sovereignty and allows men to be determinative. Paul argues just the opposite in Romans 9. God cannot suspend His sovereignty; it is essential to His glory. He cannot be less than sovereign any more than He can be less than eternal, less than holy, or less than love.

Romans 9:17-18 God's freedom to harden

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. (NASB)

Paul's Example: Pharaoh Amenhotep II of the Exodus

The first mention of God's interaction with Pharaoh:

Exodus 4:21

Note: Texts such as Exodus 9:34 leave full room for real human responsibility.

Conclusion:

God is sovereign over both mercy and hardening.

Romans 9:19 The accusation against God's freedom

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" (NASB)

John Murray: How can God blame us when we are the victims of his irresistible decree? (Romans 2:31)

Paul first addresses what he perceives to be an attitude problem: *The imagined objection also evidences an attitudinal problem The objection suggests that God ... owes us an explanation.* (John Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 700)

Romans 9:20-21 The rightness of God's freedom

²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? (NASB)

The right of creation:

God, as Creator, has the unassailable right to be definitively and exhaustively sovereign over His creatures.

J. I. Packer:

Creatures are not entitled to register complaints about their Creator. (Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 23)

OT background:

Isaiah 45:9

Point:

God is Creator. He has the full and just right to make, use, and dispense with His creatures as He sees fit. Never think, of course, that God does so arbitrarily, haphazardly, capriciously, as a little boy would play with his plastic army men. God is infinitely wise, good, and trustworthy.

Paul's exemplary humility:

Romans 11:33-36

Romans 9:22-23 The goal of God's freedom

²²What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory... (NASB)

Questions:

If God is sovereign why doesn't He save everyone?

Three key infinitives expressing the goal of God's free choices:

9:22 *to demonstrate* *to make known*

9:23 *to make known*

Principle:

God does everything He does to make known who He is or what His attributes are. In a word, God does everything He does for His *glory*.

God's first goal:

To display His justice, wrath, power to judge, and patient endurance (9:22).

God's second goal:

To display His mercy (9:23).

God's glory is adequately demonstrated only if *both* His justice and His compassion are put on display. Furthermore, the point of vv. 22-23 is that God's judgement is the backdrop against which the glory of His mercy shines all the brighter.

Technical Issue:

Verse 22 uses the middle or passive voice, while verse 23 uses the active voice to refer to the preparation of the two different vessels.

Regarding 9:22:

middle voice:	the vessels of wrath are <i>self-prepared</i> for destruction
passive voice:	God is the ultimate agent, the divine Potter.

The middle view has little to commend it. (Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 418; see also Piper, *The Justification of God*, 211-213)

- The direct middle is quite rare and used almost exclusively in idiomatic expressions.
- Nowhere else in the NT does this verb occur in the direct middle.
- In the perfect tense, this verb is passive in all its other NT uses.
- The context strongly argues for a passive with God as the Potter.

Conclusion:

1) God cannot be less than sovereign.

2) God is just when He chooses one undeserving sinner over another: it's His right as Creator and it is in line with His perfect character.

3) God's electing choices are made in full accord with His infinite goodness and wisdom.

The response:

Romans 11:36