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## The Five Points of Calvinism Considered

By David Servant

### 2. Unconditional Election

So far we've covered the T and the I of the TULIP acronym. Now we will proceed with the U, which stands for Unconditional Election. This Calvinistic doctrine states that God, in eternity past, chose certain individuals for salvation. This election was not based on any merit of those chosen, and not due to anything God foreknew about them. The Calvinist points to the many scriptures that use words such as *chosen*, *elected*, and *predestined* to make his point.

No reasonable person would argue that the Bible doesn't say that Christians have been chosen, elected or predestined by God. The debate between Calvinists and non-Calvinists is what those terms specifically mean. Calvinists argue that God's election is *unconditional*, while non-Calvinists argue that election is *conditional*. Calvinists sometimes respond by saying that the term, "conditional election," is an oxymoron and that non-Calvinists force a meaning upon the term "election." Yet every election ever known to man has been conditional. We elect, or choose, a spouse based on criteria we have established. We elect politicians based on their voting records and promises. We elect, or choose, jobs based on benefits we will receive. Why then must the term "conditional election" be an oxymoron? When people use the word "election" in speaking of any subject other than theology, they are always speaking of a conditional election. Who has ever heard of any "unconditional election" outside of Calvinistic theology? Thus the phrase "unconditional election" is much more of an oxymoron.

Non-Calvinists maintain that before the foundation of the world, God elected to save those, and only those, who believe. Thus our election is conditioned upon our faith. Those who believe make up the group of people whom the Bible refers to as the *elect* or *chosen* of God. And because God is all knowing, He foreknew those who would believe. We have been, as Peter writes, "chosen *according to the foreknowledge* of God" (1 Pet. 1:1-2, emphasis added). This view is the only one that is consistent with all of Scripture, as we will soon see.

The Calvinist, who believes in man's total depravity and God's irresistible grace, has no choice but to believe in God's supposed unconditional election. His foundational theology leaves him no other alternative, and that is why Calvinists often begin, like John Piper, citing those two foundations as they begin to defend their concept of unconditional

election (see Piper, p. 19, par. 1). If man is totally depraved and unable to repent, and salvation is all the work of God and none of man, then those who are saved must be so only because of God's choosing them. There is, however, no need for me to respond to this typical initial argument, since we've found that the two foundational assumptions are fatally flawed. God doesn't save people by bestowing on them irresistible grace, and no saved person was ever totally depraved by the Calvinistic definition.

Obviously, the idea of God predestining some to salvation means that He also predestined some to eternal damnation, what is called *reprobation*. Calvin wrote in his *Institutes*,

All men are not created for the same end; but some are fore-ordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation. So according as every man was created for the one end or the other, we say, he was elected, that is, predestined to life, or reprobated, that is, predestined to damnation (*Calv. Inst.*, book 3, chapter 21, section 1).

Some Calvinists who assert election foolishly deny reprobation, but there is no escape from the fact that it is impossible to hold one without holding the other. People who are not chosen to be saved are chosen to be damned. Calvin himself asserts this undeniable fact:

Many indeed (thinking to excuse God) own election, and yet deny reprobation; but this is quite silly and childish. For without reprobation, election itself cannot stand; whom God passes by, those he reprobates. It is one and the same thing (*Calv. Inst.*, book 3, chapter 23, section 1).

Calvin was absolutely right on this point. "Without reprobation, election itself cannot stand." Make no mistake about this: God wants certain people to go to hell, otherwise He would have predestined them to go to heaven and bestowed upon them His "irresistible grace." And this is what makes the doctrine of unconditional election so repugnant to lovers of God, for it makes their God into a monster who creates people for the express purpose of tormenting them eternally in hell. From before the time they were born, they were doomed, with no hope of escaping eternal fires. It would have been better if such people had never been born. And some Calvinists say that this actually glorifies God.

Dear Calvinist, what would you say if you discovered that people were saying of you and your newly-wedded spouse, "I hear they are planning on having six children, five of whom they plan to cruelly torture all their lives, and one of whom they plan to treat kindly"? Would you not be greatly offended that anyone would even entertain such an awful rumor? Yet that is what you are saying about God! You nullify His great attributes of love and justice with your doctrine!

How is it possible to reconcile unconditional election/damnation with the scores of scriptures that clearly state that God desires for *all* to be saved? Here is just a small sampling:

"Go therefore to the main highways, and *as many as you find there, invite* to the wedding feast" (Matt. 22:9, emphasis added).

And [Jesus] said to them, “Go into *all* the world and preach the gospel to *all* creation” (Mark 16:15, emphasis added).

“I say these things that *you* [those who persecuted Him and wanted to kill Him; see John 5:16-18] *may be saved* (John 5:34, emphasis added). [And why were they not saved? Jesus explains in 5:40:] “And *you* are *unwilling* to come to Me, *that you may have life*” (emphasis added).

“And [God] made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27).

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that *all everywhere* should repent (Acts 17:30, emphasis added).

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, *who gave Himself as a ransom for all*, the testimony borne at the proper time (1 Tim. 2:3-6, emphasis added).

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, *not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance* (2 Pet. 3:9, emphasis added).

And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the *world* (1 John 4:14, emphasis added).

Anyone who believes these scriptures at face value must abandon the idea of unconditional election/damnation.

How is it possible to reconcile the idea of unconditional election with God’s many universal invitations to salvation? How could He be considered anything less than a cruel deceiver if He invites people to receive His gift when He Himself has sovereignly decreed that they shall never receive it? What would we think of someone who holds a rope thirty feet above a man at the bottom of well and pleads with him to take hold of it so he can pull him out? We would think the rope-holder was deranged at best and a cruel demon at worst. Consider the following utterances from the lips of God’s Son; if God has unconditionally elected some to salvation and the rest to damnation, could Christ have been sincere in saying the following?

Come to Me, *all* who are weary and heavy-laden, and I *will* give you rest (Matt. 11:28, emphasis added).

And He was saying to them *all*, “If *anyone* wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23, emphasis added).

For *whoever* wishes to save his life shall lose it; but *whoever* loses his life for My sake shall find it (Matt. 16:25, emphasis added).

For God so loved the *world*, that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whoever* believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, *but that the world should be saved* through Him (John 3:16-17, emphasis added).

And if anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, *but to save the world* (John 12:47, emphasis added).

If God has unalterably decreed some to salvation and the rest to damnation, then all the above scriptures are very misleading and Christ is a deceiver. Moreover, why does God plead with people to repent if they are incapable of doing so by His sovereign decree? Read the following small sampling of scriptures below and ask how they can possibly be reconciled with unconditional election/damnation without making God insincere at best and a cruel deceiver at worst:

Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever! (Deut. 5:29).

But My people did not listen to My voice; and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices. Oh that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries (Ps. 18:11-14).

Say to them, “As I live!” declares the Lord God, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11)

Hundreds of scriptures like these could be cited. Why would God lament that His people would not change their hearts and plead with them to do so if they were unable to do so by His own sovereign decree? If that were actually the case, God is a fool. (Neither must He understand, as Calvinists do, that people are totally depraved and are incapable of turning from sin.)

How is it possible to reconcile the ideas of unconditional election and damnation with the many scriptures that declare that Jesus came to save all by dying for all, atoning for everyone’s sins, even those who ultimately perish in hell? Scripture says,

All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity *of us all* to fall on Him (Is. 53:6, emphasis added).

For the Son of Man has come to save *that which was lost* (Matt. 18:11, emphasis added)

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the *world!*” (John 1:29, emphasis added).

For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that *the world* should be saved through Him (John 3:17, emphasis added).

I did not come to judge the world, but to save *the world* (John 12:47, emphasis added).

For God has shut up *all* in disobedience that He might show mercy to *all* (Rom. 11:32, emphasis added).

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for *all*, therefore *all* died; and He died for *all*, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf (2 Cor. 5:14-15, emphasis added).

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for *all*, the testimony borne at the proper time (1 Tim. 2:5-6, emphasis added).

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to *all* men (Tit. 2:11, emphasis added)

But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for *everyone* (Heb. 2:9, emphasis added).

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even *denying the Master who bought them*, bringing swift destruction upon themselves (2 Pet. 2:1, emphasis added).

He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and *not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world* (1 John 2:2, emphasis added).

In the last two scriptures quoted, we plainly see that Jesus paid for the sins of those who are not saved, including even false prophets.

How can the idea of unconditional election/damnation be reconciled with God's perfect justice? Even a child knows that such an idea holds intrinsic unfairness. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen. 18:25).

How will God judge the world in justice if unconditional election/damnation is true? When He says to the goats on His left, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink" and so on, might they not rightly say, "But we could not help but sin, because You created us totally depraved, and because we were not among the elect, You never did bestow upon us Your irresistible grace! We never had a chance to be saved, because our damnation You predestined before we were born! How can you righteously condemn us?"

Will God condemn them for what it was impossible for them not to do? Will He punish them everlastingly for not escaping what they could not escape? He might as justly punish people because their hearts beat within them! So do Calvinists nullify God's justice by elevating His sovereignty to unbiblical proportions.

How can the idea of unconditional election/damnation be reconciled with the many scriptures that speak of God's love? We are told in Scripture that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and that He "is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35). "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works" (Ps. 145:9). How could it be said that God is good to those whom He creates and predestines to damnation?

Calvinists often speak of a "common grace" that is enjoyed by all, contrasting it with "saving grace" that is extended only to those who are predestined to salvation. In His common grace, they say, everyone experiences God's goodness and love, even those not predestined to salvation, in that they enjoy His goodness to them while on earth. He supplies them with food, covering, pleasures, and so on, all temporal manifestations of His kindness.

I would beg to differ however, that such "common grace" can rightfully be considered an expression of God's love towards one who is predestined to be damned. In light of what he must suffer for eternity, it would have been better for him to never have been born! At the price he must pay for his temporal, earthly blessings, every such "blessing" is really a curse. Every kindness from God that he enjoys on earth will cost him millions of years of hellish agony. During his life he is only being fattened for the slaughter that awaits him, and better if he *had* been born an animal to be slaughtered! Perhaps the "kindest" thing God did for him while he was on earth was to hide from him his unalterable destiny. This kind of "love" is enough to make one's blood run cold. What sentence would any earthly judge bestow upon a person who displayed such "love"?

### **Piper's Argument**

In his explanation of unconditional election, Piper ignores this vast wealth of scriptural argument that contradicts his doctrine, and once again goes on a search for needles in the haystack. He thinks he finds one in Acts 13:48: "And when the Gentiles [in Pisidian Antioch] heard this [that they could be saved], they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed*" (emphasis

added). This particular verse is certainly not found in the context of any theological explanation of predestination. If one concludes from this one verse that God appoints certain people to eternal life (and thus appoints others to eternal damnation), then one must exalt this verse to the point of nullifying hundreds of other scriptures that would stand in contradiction to it. That would hardly be wise. We should, therefore, adopt an interpretation of this phrase that will make it harmonize with the rest of Scripture rather than contradict it.

I have already shown that, before time, God chose to give eternal life to all who would believe, thus all believers are members of the chosen group. They are appointed to eternal life before time because of God's foreknowledge of their faith. Luke's phrase, "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed," does not prove that a prior unconditional election was the cause of faith in those Gentiles. If I said, "As many as I appointed to wash dishes, washed dishes," does that prove that the *only* reason certain people washed dishes is because I previously appointed them, and thus their own free will had nothing to do with the fact that they washed dishes? May I not have appointed them to wash dishes because of some prior knowledge I possessed about their ability to wash dishes?

Piper's error is that he again uses a biblical phrase that is simply meant to be descriptive to try to prove a cause of salvation, and in so doing, he arrives at a conclusion that contradicts what Scripture plainly teaches is the cause of salvation.

A second possible interpretation is as follows: Note that Piper assigns an interpretation of this phrase based on an assumption, telling us, "Some believed while others did not" (p. 19, par. 4).

This is not at all what Acts 13:48 says. Scripture only says that "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." That doesn't necessarily mean that some believed while others did not. If I said, "As many children who raised their hands were given lollipops," I probably mean that every child present received a lollipop.

Because Jesus died for *every* Gentile and wants *every* Gentile to be saved, it can be rightly said that God has appointed every Gentile to eternal life. Luke may have simply been reporting that all the Gentiles who had gathered to listen to Paul believed the gospel.

### **Another Needle**

As Piper continues looking for needles in the haystack to support his view, he again resorts to assigning to a single verse an interpretation that fits his doctrine. John 10:26 says, "But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep." Piper explains that Jesus *didn't* say, "You are not my sheep because you do not believe," but rather, "You do not believe because you are not of My sheep." Thus, the reason these particular people didn't believe is because God didn't sovereignly choose them first, thus determining that they would be among His sheep. "Being a sheep is something that God decides for us before we believe," says Piper (p. 19, par. 5).

Again, Piper makes the error of trying to derive an order in the process of salvation from a verse that is metaphorical and merely meant to be descriptive. If a shepherd says about certain sheep that are grazing among his own flock, "These ones are not white, because they are not of my sheep," does that prove that the wool of his sheep was black before he obtained them, and then became white *after* they became his sheep? Is the shepherd declaring that the *sole* reason that his sheep have white wool is because they are

his sheep? No, the only real conclusion one can draw from such a statement is that the shepherd only has sheep with white wool in his flock. Likewise, Jesus was simply describing His true sheep among the bigger “flock.” His sheep believe. Those who are not of His flock don’t believe. He was not establishing an order in the process of salvation.

I wonder why Piper doesn’t quote the two verses that follow John 10:26 in order to be certain his interpretation fits the context. There we continue reading, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27-28).

Here Jesus continues to describe His relationship with His sheep. He mentions things that they do and things that He does for them. Not only do they believe in Him, but they also hear his voice (because they are near and attentive), and they follow Him (because they have obediently submitted to Him). True Christians believe in, listen to, and obey Jesus. Jesus, like any good shepherd, knows which sheep are His. He gives them eternal life, promises that they won’t perish, and also guarantees that they won’t be stolen. Clearly we see this is a two-sided relationship, both sides having responsibility.

How would we fare if we used Piper's means of interpreting John 10:26 to interpret Jesus' words regarding a just-converted prostitute, recorded in Luke 7:47?:

“For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for [because] she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Was Jesus teaching that the reason this prostitute's many sins were forgiven was because she first, prior to being forgiven, "loved much"? Or was Jesus simply describing people who have been forgiven much, identifying them as being people who love God much? The answer is obvious. Thus we should be extremely careful in deriving an order of the process of salvation from John 10:26, grasping for a cause and effect relationship in a statement that was only meant to describe true believers.

## **Romans 9**

Piper next takes us to Romans 9, a favorite of Calvinists, because when certain verses there are detached from their context, they seem to support the Calvinistic idea of the unconditional election of certain individuals. This is exactly what Piper does, citing several of those verses (9:11-12, 15-16). When such verses are interpreted within the context of the entire book of Romans, however, it becomes obvious that the Calvinistic interpretation of them stands in direct contradiction to the entire letter itself, not to mention the rest of the Bible. So let us take a closer look at the *whole* book of Romans. I will focus on those passages that help prepare us to better understand Paul’s points in Romans 9, as well as the many passages that clearly contradict Calvinistic doctrine.

The book of Romans stands out in the New Testament as the most lengthy and detailed defense of the gospel. Paul, the author, defends his divinely-given message that salvation was being withheld from unbelieving Jews (even though they were chosen by God, descendants of Israel, circumcised, and took pride in God’s Law) and was being freely granted to believing Gentiles. Such teaching many Jews naturally abhorred and rejected, and so throughout his letter, Paul addressed their various objections. This is obvious to



even the casual reader, so I will not take time to enumerate the many evidences of this fact.

## **Two Pillars of the Gospel**

Once his introduction is behind him, Paul continues chapter 1 by focusing on two foundational pillars upon which his gospel is built—the truths of humanity’s sinfulness and God’s wrath. It is here that we begin to see contradictions to the Calvinistic interpretation of certain verses in Romans 9.

Paul first describes how God’s wrath is revealed by His judgment upon sinners who are without excuse before God (see 1:18-23). In fact, Paul plainly declares that people’s ever-increasing depravity and slavery to sin is an indication of God’s judgment upon them. In the space of just a few sentences, he mentions three times how God “gives sinners over,” specifically to “impurity,” “degrading passions” and to “a depraved mind” (see 1:24, 26, 28). There is no mistaking Paul: God judges rebels by giving them over to depravity.

In this way, God can be said to be righteously hardening rebels. I suspect that Paul had more in mind than here than just illuminating his readers about one aspect of God’s wrath. If he can procure his Jewish readers’ early acceptance of the fact that God righteously hardens Gentile rebels, perhaps they will more easily accept his teaching later on in his letter that God also righteously hardens Jews who reject His Messiah.

Note also that Paul’s declarations of man’s corruption clearly stand in contradiction to the Calvinistic ideas of total depravity and irresistible grace, as God only “gives over” to depravity those who have first, by their own choice, decided to resist Him and continually yield to sin. *Before* He “gives them over,” *they* “suppress[ed] the truth” (1:18), “*they* did not honor” God “or give thanks” (1:21), “*they*...exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (1:22-23), “*they* exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (1:25), and “*they* did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer” (1:28, emphases added). Paul thus says, “*Therefore* God gave them over... to impurity....to degrading passions....to a depraved mind” (1:24, 26, 28, emphasis added). These depraved people practice homosexuality as well as many other vices that Paul lists in 1:27-32. Note again that God “gave them over” after they, having had ample opportunity to repent and also being without excuse, decided themselves to continue in their rebellion.

So, although all people are born with a propensity to sin inherited from Adam, they are not born “depraved.” God judges those who persist in the path of sin by “giving them over” to depravity. Yet even such depraved sinners are not so depraved that they cannot repent with God’s gracious help while He extends His kindness during their lifetimes (see 2:4). Clearly, Paul was not in agreement with the Calvinistic concept of total depravity, and consequently, neither could he be in agreement with the Calvinistic concept of irresistible grace.

## **Chapter 2**

Through the end of chapter 1, Jewish readers of Paul’s letter may have been saying “Amen.” Surely Paul was only writing about the depraved Gentiles. But the tables begin

to turn on any self-righteous Jew in chapter 2. There Paul unmasks the hypocrite who passes judgment on others who sin. Any person who condemns another for wrongdoing testifies before heaven's court that he knows there is such a thing as right and wrong. Thus, when he does wrong, he stands self-condemned, without excuse before God. Paul points out that people are guilty of condemning others for sins that they themselves practice (see 2:1). What person, for example, who condemns another person for lying, has never lied himself?

Paul goes on to say that everyone knows that God's judgment *rightly* falls upon such people (see 2:2). That is, we all know that such people deserve to be punished, and they would be utterly foolish to think that they will escape God's punishment when they practice sins for which they condemn others. The only thing that keeps them from being immediately punished is God's merciful kindness, which He shows them in hopes of it leading them to repent (see 2:4). But if they don't repent, they will inevitably face God's wrath, which they have been storing up for themselves as they enjoyed God's kindness all their lives (see 2:5).

Paul's words here are, of course, also contrary to the Calvinistic ideas of total depravity, irresistible grace, and unconditional election. Obviously, Paul believed that God has patience with corrupt people who can repent and whom He wants to repent, yet who never do repent, ultimately receiving the full dose of His wrath. Thus, no one is so totally depraved that he cannot repent, and thus neither is *irresistible* grace necessary. Moreover, saved people are not those who are unconditionally elected, but those who by their own choice repent while God is showing them mercy.

Paul goes on to state that because God is *perfectly* fair, He will one day "render to every man according to his deeds" (2:6), which no Jew could debate because Paul was quoting Scripture. God will give immortality, eternal life, glory, honor and peace to everyone who perseveres in doing good and who seeks for glory and honor from God. Those who do evil, who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey God, however, will face His wrath and indignation and suffer tribulation and distress (see 2:7-10).

No Jewish reader could at this point rightly accuse Paul of eliminating the necessity of holiness in order for one to ultimately receive eternal life. Some Jews who opposed Paul's gospel believed that obedience to God was very important, because one earned eternal life by keeping the Law. Paul's message was different in this respect—he believed that no one could keep the Law who is a slave of sin. One who believes the gospel, however, is supernaturally set free from sin and can keep God's commandments by the power of the indwelling Spirit. Thus, the Law is not nullified by faith as some of Paul's opponents might argue. Rather, as Paul would later declare, "through faith....we establish the Law" (Rom. 3:31).

The fates of eternal life to the righteous and eternal torment to sinners are the fates of Jews as well as Gentiles (see 2:9-10). The reason is because, as Paul says, "there is no partiality with God" (Rom. 2:11). He is perfectly fair. Clearly, this point also stands in direct contradiction to the Calvinistic idea of unconditional election, which completely voids God's impartiality. The God of the Calvinists has favorites—those whom He elects for salvation before the foundation of the world.

Paul expands the concept of God's impartiality to Jews and Gentiles in 2:12-16. God gave the Law only to the Jews, and so He will judge them by the standard of the Law. Paul adds what no Jew can argue against—just because they are hearers of the Law

doesn't make them righteous in God's sight. It is the *doers* of the Law who will be justified.

Likewise, God didn't give the Law of Moses to the Gentiles, so He will not judge them by that standard. God did, however, give them all consciences that condemn them when they do what is wrong and commend them when they do what is right. They will be held accountable to that "law in their hearts."

Paul next challenges his Jewish opponents to logically apply to themselves what he has just said. He exposes the common Jew who knows God's Law, boasts in it, and teaches it to others, but who transgresses it himself, and asks him to compare himself to an uncircumcised Gentile who instinctively obeys the Law by following his divinely-given conscience. Such upright Gentiles can rightfully condemn such hypocritical Jews. By his example, Paul exposes the absurdity of the common Jewish belief that their being circumcised somehow made them right before God. He even goes so far as to say that in such a case, God would consider such a hypocritical Jew to be uncircumcised, and such an upright Gentile to be circumcised. The reason is because true circumcision is of the heart. Paul writes, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God" (2:28-29). A true Jew has had his heart changed by the Spirit and pleases God by his heart obedience.

Within the second chapter, Paul has been setting up his Jewish opponents so they won't be able to logically argue against his doctrine that God is freely granting salvation to believing Gentiles while rejecting unbelieving Jews. If Jews can be justified by obeying the Law that God gave them, then certainly Gentiles can be justified by obeying the consciences that God gave them. If not, then God would be unfair, and this the Jews had to acknowledge. Now they are set up for the next point of Paul's argument.

As Paul will next explain in chapter 3, Jews and Gentiles are both "under sin" (3:9), both stand equally condemned before God, and thus neither can obtain salvation by obedience to God's law. Thus, if either are to be saved, it must be by another way, and if God offers that way to Jews, He must in fairness also offer it to Gentiles. That way, of course, is the way of faith. Thus God can righteously reject unbelieving Jews and righteously accept believing Gentiles, just as much as He can righteously reject unbelieving Gentiles and righteously accept believing Jews. If this is not true, then God is partial, which stands against what Scripture teaches.

### **Chapter 3**

From the start of chapter 3, Paul anticipates an inevitable Jewish objection to what he has just written about uncircumcised Gentiles being accepted by God while circumcised Jews are rejected by Him: "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?" (Rom. 3:1).

Paul responds by saying that Jews are greatly advantaged because they were entrusted with the "oracles of God" (3:2). That is, they were given God's word in what we call the Old Testament.

Yet some of the Jews to whom God's oracles were given did not believe what God said, for example, those Jews who didn't enter the Promised Land. Paul thus asks, "What

then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?" (Rom. 3:3). Paul responds to this question by exclaiming, "May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar" (Rom. 3:4).

Here Paul begins to respond to a Jewish objection that he later expands upon in chapter 9. His Jewish opponents apparently argued that if his gospel were true, then God's word had failed (see 9:6), because by Paul's criteria, most of the Jews had failed to obtain the salvation God promised them. Here Paul reminds Jewish readers that it is not God's fault that some Jews didn't or don't believe. Neither does their unbelief nullify God's faithfulness to His promises.

Because all people, Jew and Gentile, stand condemned for their sin and fall short of God's glory, Paul says that "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in [God's] sight" (3:20). The Law doesn't save anyone; it only brings "the knowledge of sin" (3:20) and reveals God's righteousness (see 3:21). God has, however, provided a salvation that is granted by His grace to all sinners, Jew and Gentile, if they will believe in Jesus (see 3:22-23).

Another primary Jewish objection to Paul's gospel is that it made God look unfair or unrighteous, in that He was accepting wicked, sinful Gentiles but rejecting "law-abiding" Jews. But in light of the fact that Jews stood just as condemned before God as Gentiles, Paul's gospel did not make God unrighteous in the least. On the contrary, it made God look perfectly righteous in several ways.

First, because God showed "no distinction" (3:22) between Jews and Gentiles. Since all Jews and Gentiles sinned and stood equally condemned, God made atonement for all their sins, and offered them all, by His grace, the gift of salvation, conditioned on each person's faith. What could be more fair or righteous to Jews and Gentiles?

Second, Paul's gospel vindicated God before those who accused Him of being unrighteous when He showed "forbearance" and "passed over the sins previously committed" (3:25), that is, when God didn't immediately punish people's sins in the past. Paul's gospel revealed that as Christ hung on the cross, He died for all sins for all time as a "propitiation" (3:25), that is, as a sacrifice that appeased God's wrath against sin. Thus all sin was punished in Christ, and His sacrifice made it possible for God to show forbearance to sinners without compromising His own righteousness. Apart from Jesus' substitutionary death, God could have been rightly accused of unrighteousness when He showed forbearance to those who committed sin. Christ's death is the basis for all mercy He has ever shown.

Third, Paul's gospel revealed God's righteousness in that when it was believed by Jews and Gentiles, they were made righteous, legally and practically. Paul's gospel revealed God's righteousness in all these ways, and thus the Jews' objection that his message made God unrighteous was completely unfounded.

Again, it is obvious that what Paul has written in the third chapter stands against Calvinistic doctrine. Calvinism does not uphold God's righteousness, as it makes God partial to certain people and makes Him unjust. Paul's gospel made salvation equally accessible to Jews and Gentiles. There is no hint of unconditional election in this third chapter.

Paul asks a final question at the end of chapter 3, an objection that he either anticipates or has heard: "Do we then nullify the Law through faith?" and answers, "May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law" (3:31).

This could be paraphrased, “In light of what I’ve just written, does my gospel of salvation by faith nullify the Law, making words of God Himself meaningless, as some accuse? That, you surely now realize, is an absurd accusation! My gospel doesn’t *nullify* the Law, it *establishes* the Law, because it harmonizes perfectly with, supports and upholds the Law. It reveals God’s righteousness even better than the Law does. It puts the Law in its proper and intended place. It is the fulfillment of many promises, types and shadows found in the Law that pointed to Jesus. It results in people becoming obedient to God’s Law. How could any intelligent person say that my gospel nullifies the Law?!”

## Chapter 4

In chapter 4, by quoting Genesis 15:6, Paul proves that Abraham, revered ancestor of all Jews through his son, Jacob, was justified by faith and not by works (see 4:1-3). This is a strong argument in Paul’s favor, putting Abraham on his side. Additionally, Paul points out that Abraham was justified *before* he received the rite of circumcision (see 4:10-11), something the Jews considered essential for salvation, if not the very guarantee of salvation. Because Abraham was declared righteous before he received circumcision, this proves that non-circumcised Gentiles can be justified before God without being circumcised. Thus Abraham “received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised” (4:11). In this way, Abraham becomes a father even to those who are not of his physical lineage, but who follow his faith, and this was even foretold in Scripture when God promised to make him “a father of many nations” (4:17).

Perhaps anticipating that some Jews might retort that Abraham wasn’t required to keep the Law for salvation since he lived before God gave the Law of Moses, Paul also cites some words of David, a man who lived under Mosaic Law. David’s words also prove that, even under the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, justification was by faith and not works, as he wrote of the blessed man “whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered...whose sin the Lord will not take into account” (4:7-8).

Going a step further, Paul declares that God’s promised blessing to Abraham and his descendants was conditioned on faith and not on the Law. Therefore, those who try to inherit that blessing by keeping the Law nullify God’s promise to Abraham and his posterity (see 4:13-14). Paul argued this same point in Galatians 3:17: “The Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later [after God’s promise to Abraham and his seed], does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.”

So we see that Paul is still addressing Jewish objections to his gospel.

## Chapter 5

In the second half of chapter 5, Paul answers yet another objection. Some might say, “How is it possible for *one* man’s act to make salvation possible for *all* people? Paul responds by relating how one man’s act brought death to the entire world, and then compares the negative results of Adam’s sin with the positive results of Jesus’ death (see 5:12-21).

Within his comparison, Paul writes, “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to *all men*, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to *all men*” (5:18, emphasis added). From reading everything else Paul wrote, we can safely assume that he was not asserting here that all people *will* be justified, but that all people *can* be justified through Jesus’ “act of righteousness.” There is no difference between the “all men” who are condemned by Adam’s sin and the “all men” who can be justified by Jesus’ obedience. This, of course, flatly contradicts the Calvinistic idea of unconditional election, as well as the Calvinist idea that Jesus only died for the sins of those predestined to be saved (what Calvinists call the “limited atonement”). If Paul affirms an unconditional election in chapter 9, we would have to wonder why he contradicted himself in chapter 5.

## Chapters 6-8

Some of Paul’s adversaries apparently argued that if his doctrine of salvation by grace were true, then it follows that we should continue to sin so God can show us more grace. Similarly, some argued that if we are not under law (as a means of earning our salvation), then we have no motivation not to sin.

Paul annuls these objections by revealing that those who have truly received God’s grace, that is, true believers, have become obedient from their hearts (see 6:17) and have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection (see 6:2-7). They have thus died to sin, are freed from it, and it no longer has dominion over them (see 6:2, 7, 14). Believers are released from the Law’s condemnation by Christ’s death (see 7:1-6). Now “we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter” (7:6).

This naturally leads Paul in the second half of chapter 7 to discuss the plight of the Jew who desires to keep the Law but who is still bound by sin (see 7:14-25). A “wretched man” (7:24) is he indeed, and one with whom every Jew who was genuinely attempting to keep the Law could identify. The only one who can set him free from his bondage is Jesus (see 7:24-25).

In chapter 8 Paul continues this theme, highlighting the great advantage gained by those who have been regenerated and are now “in the Spirit,” no longer “in the flesh” (8:9). Such people have an obligation to follow the indwelling Spirit, and they are God’s own children and heirs (see 8:12-17). They should patiently wait, even if suffering for their faith, for the time when God’s plan of salvation will be completely fulfilled, when all of the physical creation, including their own bodies, will be transformed for God’s glory (see 8:18-25).

Paul then declares,

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (8:28-30).

This passage Piper highlights later in his chapter on unconditional election (see pp. 21-22), saying that it is “perhaps the most important text of all in relation to the teaching of unconditional election” (p. 21, prgh. 3). He then attempts to show that what this scripture plainly states, it doesn’t actually mean, because it clearly contradicts Calvinistic theology.

Anyone who reads this passage without a Calvinistic bias would conclude that God causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him, that is, the believers. This is demonstrated by the fact that those whom God foreknows will love Him, He predestines to become conformed to the image of Jesus, He calls them through the gospel, He justifies them, and He ultimately glorifies them.

Piper attempts to prove that when Paul used the word “foreknew” in regard to the believers, the actual meaning of the word “foreknew” in this context is “foreordained.” The flaw in his logic that he uses to prove his point is so glaring it is almost embarrassing to expose it. But expose it I must.

Piper ignores the fact that Paul is writing from the beginning of verses 28 and 29 *exclusively* about people who are saved. Paul defines them as those who “love God,” those who are “called according to His purpose” and those whom God “foreknew.” Paul is clearly not writing about all people, but only those who are Christians.

Piper points out that Paul says in verse 30 that those whom God calls He justifies. Piper then says that this calling which Paul mentions is not the general call of repentance given to all people because Paul says it *always* results in justification. Since not everyone who hears the general call ends up justified, this call of which Paul speaks here must be, according to Piper, the *Calvinistic* call of “irresistible grace,” the call that is given only to those unconditionally elected for salvation. Piper ignores the fact that God’s general call of salvation always results in the justification of those whom God foreknew would believe, which are, of course, the only people about whom Paul was writing.

Based on his conclusion that Paul was writing about people who are called by God’s irresistible grace, Piper then goes back to the beginning of verse 29 and redefines what Paul must have meant when he spoke of those whom God foreknew. Since Paul was “obviously” writing about only those who are unconditionally elected and irresistibly drawn, when he used the word “foreknew” in verse 29, it must be equivalent to the word “foreordained”! What logic! What nonsense!

Again, the truth of the matter is that the general call of the gospel always does result in the justification of those whom God foreknew would believe, which are the only ones Paul was speaking of in this passage from the beginning. It is just that simple. Thus Piper’s Calvinistic argument collapses.

Moreover, foreknowledge and foreordination are not the same things. I might foreknow that it is going to rain, but that doesn’t prove that I foreordained that it would rain. God foreknows who will be saved because He foreknows who will believe. How full is the Bible of events that God foreknew and foretold by prophecy but did not foreordain! How can foreknowledge be said to be equivalent to foreordination?

Note also that Paul says nothing in the above passage about God predestining anyone to salvation, but only to Him predestining certain people to be conformed to Christ’s image whom He foreknew. In that sense, God predestines Christians. Foreknowing believers, He predestines them to become like Christ.

Incidentally, God calls people through the gospel, not by irresistible grace (although He does draw them by a grace that is resistible). Paul told the Thessalonian believers,

“He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thes. 2:14, emphasis added).

When Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica, did he only preach to people who were pre-selected to be saved? No, many who heard the gospel in Thessalonica rejected it (see Acts 17:1-12). *Everyone* in Thessalonica was called by God through the gospel. So when Paul wrote that the Thessalonians were “called through [his] gospel,” he certainly didn’t think that all the Thessalonians who were called were automatically justified.

Interestingly, one sentence before Paul wrote that God called the Thessalonians through the gospel, he wrote, “God has *chosen you* from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit *and faith in the truth*” (2 Thes. 2:13, emphasis added). Paul could say that God had chosen the Thessalonians to whom he was writing because God has chosen from the beginning to save all who would have “faith in the truth” under the drawing of God’s Spirit. Indeed, as Jesus said, “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). All those who believe are among God’s chosen.

## Chapter 9

Paul begins this chapter by expressing his sincere love for his fellow Jews, even though most of them have rejected his gospel (see 9:1-3). Shortly thereafter, he declares that to the Jews “*belongs the adoption as sons*” (9:4, emphasis added). This statement clearly contradicts the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election. If Paul believed that God had selected only certain Jews for salvation, he would have never made such a statement. Clearly, he believed that adoption into God’s family was something that belonged to every Jew, but each individual Jew must believe in Jesus if he is to enjoy the adoption that belongs to him.

If he does not enjoy his rightful adoption, it is not God’s fault. Paul declares this fact just one verse later, stating, “But it is not as though the word of God has failed” (9:6). God’s word never fails. Paul’s Jewish opponents apparently argued that if his gospel were true, then God’s word had failed, because by Paul’s criteria, most of the Jews had failed to obtain the salvation God had promised to them.

Paul knows God’s word well enough, however, to know that God did not promise salvation to every physical descendant of Israel or to every Jew who attempts to keep the Law, but only to those who believe. Moreover, Paul knows God’s word well enough to know that God had even foretold through the Prophets that very few Jews would believe the gospel, while many Gentiles would embrace it. And this is what the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans is all about.

Directly after Paul declares that God’s word has not failed, he states, “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (9:6). Paul can only mean that just because one is a physical descendant of Israel doesn’t mean that he is a *true* Israelite. No Jew should rely upon his physical lineage to guarantee his salvation, any more than he should rely upon his physical circumcision, as Paul had earlier warned (see 2:25-29).

Paul continues by expanding on this idea:

Neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “through Isaac your descendants will be named.” That is [here is Paul’s explanation of what he just said], *it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children*



*of the promise are regarded as descendants.* For this is a word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son”(9:7-9, emphasis added).

Again, the *primary* point is that physical lineage does not guarantee blessing from God, as proven by the case of Ishmael. Ishmael was a physical descendant of Abraham who did not receive the blessing given to Isaac.

Paul draws a further parallel with this example to his contemporary Jewish readers. They may either be like Isaac or Ishmael in this respect: Believing Jews are like Isaac, “children of the promise,” who receive the blessing by faith. Unbelieving Jews are like Ishmael, “children of the flesh,” who are only physical descendants.

Obviously, like all comparisons, this one is imperfect, and there are many dissimilarities that could be mentioned between Isaac and believers and Ishmael and unbelievers. Paul only draws out one similarity. His point is that God has chosen to bless only those who have faith in His promise. No Jew should rely on his physical lineage to obtain God’s blessing. And God certainly has the right to determine whom He accepts and whom He rejects. Paul continues:

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Rom. 9:10-13).

This is one of the passages Piper points out, and he claims that Paul is teaching that believers are unconditionally elected before birth just as Jacob was unconditionally elected before his birth. Piper unfortunately neglects the context that we have just considered.

Once more, Paul is proving that one’s lineage does not guarantee blessing from God. He highlights another one of God’s previous choices, when God made a choice in regard to Jacob over Esau. Esau was a physical descendant of Isaac who did not receive the blessing given to Jacob.

And once again, Paul draws an additional parallel with this example to his contemporary readers: *God’s choosing of Jacob was definitely not based on his works.* That is obvious to anyone who reads Jacob’s life story. He was a sinful, selfish deceiver, and God knew what he would be like before he was born. Yet God chose him just as He has chosen to bless sinful Gentiles who believe. How could Jewish readers legitimately object to Paul’s doctrine that God had chosen to bless sinful Gentiles when their forefather, Israel, was no different than any sinful Gentile?

Paul is in no way trying to convince his readers that the reason some are saved and some are unsaved is because God has pre-selected only some to salvation, as in the cases of Isaac and Jacob! Neither Jacob nor Isaac were pre-selected to be saved, and there is no scriptural proof that either Ishmael or Esau died unsaved. Ishmael and Esau were simply not chosen to be in the messianic lineage. Paul is illustrating that God has the sovereign right to make His choices, regardless of what any man thinks, and that neither physical lineage nor doing some good works guarantees His blessing.

Incidentally, when God told Rebekah why her twins were struggling in her womb, God said to her, “Two *nations* are in your womb; and two *peoples* shall be separated from your body; and one *people* shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23, emphasis added). This was a foretelling of what would happen to the posterity of her sons, not the sons themselves, and we know, of course, that what God said did not come to pass in her sons, but in their posterity. Likewise, when God said through His prophet Malachi, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,” He was speaking not of the individuals Jacob and Esau, but of their posterity, as Malachi 1:2-5 reveals. In Paul’s analogy, Jacob corresponded to those whom God had chosen before time to love—believers. Esau corresponded to those God had chosen before time to hate—unbelievers.

Again, like all comparisons, this one is imperfect. We must be cautious that we don’t try to read more into than Paul intended, and the context helps us to do that. Paul’s example of Jacob or Esau cannot be rightfully interpreted that God chose Jacob for salvation and Esau for damnation or that God has done anything similar with any individual before or after them. Otherwise, we take Paul’s words out of their context and make him contradict himself in his very next sentence, which says, “What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!” (9:14).

Paul is masterfully exposing the fallacy of the Jew’s argument. They said it was unjust for God to show saving mercy to the Gentiles that He withheld from His own people. Paul has just proved otherwise from their own history. If they say Paul’s message makes God unjust, then they must also admit that God was unjust in regard to His choices of Isaac and Jacob over Ishmael and Esau. Paul’s opponents are cornered. *Checkmate!*

An unjust God is an impossibility in Paul’s mind, and so it should be in everyone’s mind. If God did choose Jacob for salvation and Esau for damnation before they were born, then God is *very* unjust! Who can, however, accuse God of injustice just because He chose Jacob rather than Esau to be in the messianic lineage? God has such a right. And who can accuse Him of injustice if He chooses to show grace to sinners who become humble believers and chooses to withhold His grace from proud sinners who attempt to earn their salvation? There is no injustice in that. But there is indeed injustice in God if He unconditionally elects some to salvation and some to damnation.

Paul continues:

For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. 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.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires (9:15-18).

To Paul, salvation is not a matter of to whom God shows justice. Rather, it is a matter of to whom God shows mercy. If every person received God’s due justice, every person would be condemned, because all have sinned, a point Paul had made earlier in this letter. So the only question is, *To whom, if anyone, is God showing mercy in salvation?* His answer, of course, is that God shows mercy in saving anyone who believes, by which He does not compromise His fairness to all.. He will have mercy on whom He will have

mercy, and no one has any right to find fault with Him for showing mercy to whom He chooses. To find fault with God for showing mercy to believing Gentiles is to judge God and exalt one's self.

Just as God has the right to show mercy to whomever He desires, He also has the right to harden whomever He desires. No one can rightfully find fault for Him hardening anyone He desires. Thankfully, because God is righteous, He hardens only those who have repeatedly rejected His mercy. Paul points specifically to Pharaoh, whom God showed incredible mercy over a period of time (and nobody can argue against this). On at least three occasions, Scripture says that Pharaoh hardened his heart, and thus God decided to show him no further mercy, and Scripture begins to say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (see Ex. 7:13, 22: 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34-35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8). Who can find fault with God for that?

Likewise, God had shown *incredible* mercy to the Jews, as Paul would soon say in 10:21, quoting Isaiah 65:1: "All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." Certainly God had the right to harden them now just as He did Pharaoh of old. Paul will soon show that the Prophets predicted the Jews' rejection of Christ and God's hardening of them because of it (see 9:27-29; 33; 10:19-21; 11:7-10).

Calvinists misuse Paul's words in this passage (and Piper is no exception), saying that God has compassion on some and hardens others for no other reason than His good pleasure. That makes God unjust, the *very thing Paul was arguing against*, and contradicts his summarizing statement to this entire section of scripture: "For God has shut up *all* in disobedience that He might show mercy to *all*" (11:32). God will indeed have mercy on whom He will have mercy, and, because He is perfectly just, He extends His saving mercy to all, Jews and Gentiles. (Clearly, Paul is writing in this passage about God's *saving* mercy, and not about His supposed "common" mercy.)

Anticipating the consequent objection to what he has just said, Paul writes, "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (Rom 9:19).

If God actually hardens rebels, then why does He still find fault with them? is the question posed. The answer is that God *righteously* hardens rebels. He hardens them as a means of judgment upon them. Paul, however doesn't mention this at this point, but sharply rebukes anyone who would dare find fault with God for hardening anyone. We are not the judge of God; He is our judge. Anyone who has been hardened by God cannot rightly point a finger of accusation against Him. God has the right to do whatever He desires with us, and thank God that He has shown us all incredible mercy in order that we might repent and be saved.

Paul continues defending God's right to do what He pleases with what is His:

The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 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? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand

for glory, even us, whom He also called, *not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles* (9:19-24, emphasis added).

I italicized the last part of 9:24 just to remind us that Paul is still writing about the Jewish controversy about the justice of God in saving believing Gentiles while rejecting unbelieving Jews.

Paul is not, and cannot, be attempting to persuade his readers that God pre-selects some to be “vessels of wrath” and others to be “vessels of mercy,” as that would contradict everything He has said about God’s justice. Rather, Paul is emphasizing that God has been extremely patient with those who were “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (9:22). These “vessels” were not “prepared sovereignly by God,” but simply “prepared,” or “ready” for destruction because of their own sinfulness. Paul is not saying that only a certain percentage of people are “vessels of wrath.” *All* people are such vessels prior to their repentance and regeneration, as Paul has made abundantly clear in earlier chapters of Romans.

Paul explains that the reason God was so patient with vessels that were so worthy of His judgment was so “He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory [“beforehand” because He foreknew who would believe; see 8:29], even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles” (9:23). Clearly, in opposition to what some Jews wanted to believe, Paul believed that the “vessels of mercy” include Gentiles whom God has called through the gospel. That is still the primary point of this chapter. To buttress his point, Paul offers proof that God foretold through His prophets that God would save Gentiles but that there would only be a remnant of Jews who would be saved:

As He says also in Hosea, “I will call those who were not My people [Gentiles], ‘My people,’ And her who was not beloved, ‘beloved.’” And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, ‘you are not My people,’ There they shall be called sons of the living God.” And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; for the Lord will execute His word upon the earth, thoroughly and quickly.” And just as Isaiah foretold, “Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, We would have become as Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah” (9:25-29).

Finally, we arrive at Paul’s summary of this entire 9<sup>th</sup> chapter. Here it becomes even more clear that Paul has all along been refuting the Jewish objection to his doctrine that God was accepting believing Gentiles and rejecting unbelieving Jews:

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.” (9:30-33).

Paul's point is so obvious that one wonders how any Calvinist can miss it. Many Gentiles attained righteousness while many Jews did not, because they did not pursue it by faith as did the Gentiles. And God had foretold this would happen through Isaiah, saying that the Messiah would be a stumbling stone to some, but *anyone* who would believe in Him would not be disappointed. Isaiah foretold of a salvation that would be available to anyone by faith.

## Chapters 10 and 11

Paul devotes two more chapters to the Jewish/Gentile issue, both of which stand in contradiction to Calvinistic doctrine. He begins chapter 10 by stating that his prayer to God is for the salvation of his fellow Jews (see 10:1). Had Paul been a Calvinist, he would never have prayed such a prayer, knowing that the salvation or damnation of every person was already determined before the foundation of the world. Thus, there is no reason to pray for anyone's salvation. Any Calvinist who prays for the salvation of other people is inconsistent with his own theology. Even if he prays, "Lord, whenever it pleases You, bestow Your irresistible grace upon those whom You have predestined to be saved," his prayer accomplishes nothing. God will do what he has requested regardless of his request.

In 10:4, Paul again affirms the universal opportunity of salvation: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to *everyone* who believes" (emphasis added). He then pulls out an arsenal of scriptures to seal his case. In so doing, he repeatedly declares that salvation is available to all in 10:11-13, quoting the prophets Isaiah and Joel:

For the Scripture says, "*Whoever* believes in Him will not be disappointed." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of *all*, abounding in riches for *all* who call upon Him; for "*Whoever* will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (emphasis added).

The very word "whoever" which Paul uses twice in this passage contradicts Calvinistic theology, because it implies that individuals can make a choice. To Calvinists, totally depraved people can't choose to repent or believe, and *only* those who are unconditionally elected, irresistibly drawn and sovereignly regenerated will ever do so. Thus, the concept implied by the word "whoever" does not exist in the Calvinist system.

Paul again puts the blame on the Jews themselves for not being saved, quoting from the most well-known messianic chapter in the Old Testament, Isaiah 53: "Lord, who has *believed* our report?" (Is. 53:1, emphasis added). Had they believed the report of the Messiah in Isaiah's 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter, any of them could have been saved.

Paul then quotes Deuteronomy 32:21, where God said that He would make His people jealous and angry by "a nation without understanding" (10:19). Paul reveals a few verses later that he was following God's example in this (see 11:11), attempting to "move to jealousy" some of his "fellow-countrymen and save some of them" (11:14). Paul believed that it was possible for him (and God) to do something that would motivate fellow Jews to believe and be saved. Calvinism's doctrines of total depravity, irresistible grace and unconditional election all melt in the light of such truth.

Paul again quotes Isaiah to prove that God planned to save Gentiles (see 10:20) and had extended His merciful hand to His own “disobedient and obstinate people” (10:21). Once more the implication is that God wanted Jews to be saved, but they would not repent.

Lest anyone think Paul thought that God had completely rejected the Jews, Paul begins the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter by refuting that idea, first pointing to himself as proof that God had not rejected the descendants of Israel. Then he cites an Old Testament example of an ancient Israelite who thought he might be the only true follower of Jehovah remaining on the earth:

God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, they have torn down Thine altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” But what is the divine response to him? “I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (11:2-4).

Notice that God said He had kept seven thousand men for Himself, but they were men who had made the decision not to bow their knee to Baal. God made a decision based upon their decision, not the other way around. Just like Elijah, who by his own free will had decided to serve God and not Baal, so there were seven thousand others like him.

Paul then makes an application of this story to his contemporary situation: “In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (11:5). That is, just as in Elijah’s day, God had graciously chosen to keep for Himself a remnant of Jews. They consist of those who believe. Paul immediately emphasizes this condition of acceptance with God in his very next sentence: “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (11:6). Those who attempt to earn salvation by their works are excluded from being among God’s chosen group. He has determined to show grace to those who believe.

Paul continues:

What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; just as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day.” And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever” (11:7-10).

The majority of Israelites had not obtained the salvation they were seeking, with the exception of those who were *chosen*. Ripped from its context and interpreted with a Calvinistic bias, one could use this scripture as a proof-text for unconditional election. But when we read it within its context without a Calvinistic bias, we easily see that Paul is writing about a *conditional* election. That is, God has chosen to save those who believe. They are His true chosen people.

Incidentally, note that Paul clearly stated that the Jews had been seeking salvation, but had not obtained it, because, as we know, they had been seeking it by works. This, of course, contradicts Calvinism's doctrine of total depravity. The unsaved Jews of whom Paul wrote were not so totally depraved that they couldn't attempt to obey God and seek salvation.

Paul writes that those who are not among God's chosen, that is, those who do not believe, God has hardened. This subject of God's righteous hardening of rebels has already surfaced in 1:21-32 and 9:15-18. But has God hardened Christ-rejecting Jews to the point that it is now impossible for them to repent and believe? No, indeed, as Paul makes ever so clear in the very next paragraph:

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (11:11-15).

So far from stating that God has completely rejected the Jews, Paul declares that by saving Gentiles, God is attempting to move Jews to jealousy that they might be motivated to receive His free salvation. Again, this stands in direct contradiction to Calvinistic theology. If some Jews were predestined to be saved and others to be damned, God would have no reason to try to make Jews jealous by showing grace to Gentiles in hopes that Jews would be saved.

Paul also declares that, if the Jewish rejection of Christ has resulted in spiritual riches for the Gentiles, what might happen when the Jews ultimately receive Christ, as the Scripture has foretold they will? Their future acceptance of Him will be "life from the dead" (11:15), probably a reference to the future resurrection and the beginning of Christ's millennial reign on Earth. Paul develops this theme a little later in this chapter:

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (11:25-29).

By these words, Paul completes his refutation of the Jewish objection that God's word had failed if his gospel were true (see 9:6). Paul believed that God's promise of salvation to the Jews would ultimately be fulfilled when "the fullness of the Gentiles [had] come in" (11:25), when the Jews would finally, in mass, believe in Jesus. For now, however, Paul said that a "partial hardening" had happened to Israel. This was not because God

arbitrarily decided to harden certain Israelites simply because of His good pleasure, but because He had righteously hardened those who refused to believe in His Messiah. Again, He had not hardened them to the point of making it impossible for them to believe, because He was at the same time attempting to attract them to believe by making them jealous of the Gentiles who believed. If God had determined to harden certain Jews because they were not predestined to be saved, why would He attempt to motivate them to believe by making them jealous of Gentiles?

Moreover, why would God *attempt* to make anyone believe (in this case, by trying to make Jews jealous of Gentiles)? If people are only saved when God's bestows a grace that is irresistible upon those pre-ordained to be saved, then God would make no such *attempts* that leave room for possible failure and that are inconsistent with His sole means of saving people. Making certain people jealous in order to motivate them to believe in Jesus is contradictory to the Calvinistic ideas of total depravity, irresistible grace and unconditional election.

Further contradiction against Calvinistic doctrine is found in chapter 11. Drawing an analogy of a tree and its branches with God's family tree of salvation, Paul writes,

But if some of the [Jewish] branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive [a Gentile], were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. *And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again.* For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? (11:17-24, emphasis added).

Again we see that Paul believed that God would graft individual Jews into the salvation tree *if they would believe*. It was up to them, not God. Had Paul been a Calvinist, he could not have written what we did. He could only have said, "God will graft them in again if God wills for them to be grafted in and gives them the gift of faith."

Note also that Paul warned that genuinely saved Gentiles could forfeit their salvation if they stopped believing. Naturally, such a thing wouldn't be possible if unconditional election were true. If God unconditionally elected a person to be saved, then once God's irresistible grace had been bestowed upon that person, he would be permanently saved with no chance of forfeiting his salvation. One who is "grafted in" cannot be "cut off" in the Calvinistic system, yet Paul believed one "grafted in" could be "cut off." Furthermore, according to Calvinism, one who was "grafted in" and then "cut off" could never have been "grafted in" in the first place. Paul believed otherwise.

In conclusion, if Paul was affirming the Calvinistic doctrine of *Unconditional Election* in Romans 9, then he was a complete idiot, because he contradicted his own doctrine



repeatedly throughout the book of Romans, and we should thus toss his writings out with the rubbish.

### **Ephesians 1:3-6**

The only other scripture that Piper uses to defend the idea of unconditional election is Ephesians 1:3-6, a passage that, like many others, refers to believers as being chosen before the foundation of the world. Calvinists often use such verses to prove their theory of unconditional election, but they fail to notice that Paul never says anything about God's choice being *unconditional*. And they ignore the multitude of scriptures that unequivocally say that God's choice of people is *conditional*.

For example, Paul later writes in Ephesians that “by grace *you have been saved through faith*; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works” (Eph. 2:8-9, emphasis added). The salvation that God has so graciously offered to us is conditioned upon our faith, and not our works. What could be more obvious? In order to be chosen by God and saved, we must have faith. Because God foreknows what every person will do, He knows who will have faith and who will not. So those who have faith are chosen before the foundation of the world.

Thus we see how unscriptural the idea of an unconditional election is. Any person who takes the whole of Scripture into consideration will not conclude that God pre-selects some individuals for salvation and others for damnation. Only those who ignore the majority of what Scripture teaches and focus on certain out-of-context Calvinistic “proof texts” could arrive at such a conclusion.