

WHO CHOSE WHOM?

by: Ray C. Stedman

INTRODUCTION:

The ninth chapter of Romans centers around the thorniest subject that a preacher can preach on -- election (or, as some call it, predestination). This is one subject that is guaranteed to raise blood pressure whenever it is brought up, so I want to begin by reminding you that the duty of Christians is to love one another, even though they disagree about matters of interpretation. This subject has been the cause of major divisions in Protestantism. You probably know that Protestants in general are classified, theologically, as either Calvinists or Arminians.

Now, that is not Armenians -- it has nothing to do with Armenia, or the folks who come from Armenia. It is Arminian, which is simply derived from {the name of} the man who first successfully expounded these ideas: Arminius, a Dutch theologian who live in the seventeenth century.

These two groups have divided Protestantism over the subject of the election of God. Roman 9 is the meatiest passage in the Bible that deals with this matter, and, in a sense, it is the test of a man's theology.

As I read through this chapter, in preparation for this during the last several weeks, I was more and more impressed that this chapter, to many, will seem like a violent roller coaster ride. It begins slowly -- you know, that long pull to the top -- but then it takes a steep plunge that leaves many people breathless. Let's see if we can survive the ride.

Two Reminders:

There are two things that I would like you to keep in mind:

First of all, I did not write this; Paul did. I think the best that we can do is simply to work our way through the clear argument of the apostle. If you will follow with me on that, and, together, try to understand what he is saying, and, then, if you differ, your quarrel is not with me but with the greatest theologian the church has ever known. In fact -- since we believe that Paul spoke and wrote by the inspiration of God -- your quarrel is with God if you cannot agree with this passage!

The second thing that I would like to remind you of is that Romans 9 follows Romans 6, 7, & 8. There appears to be a rather sudden change of subject here when you go from Romans 8 to Romans 9 because, in the previous chapters, Paul has been concerned with the Christian and his development in spiritual life (learning to walk in the Spirit), and suddenly he seems to switch to the matter of Israel -- Romans 9, 10 & 11 is all centered about the nation Israel. But this is not really a change of subject. It is simply that Paul is illustrating, by using Israel as an example, the great themes that he has developed in Romans 6, 7, & 8. If you remember, the theme of those chapters is primarily that the life that you and I have received from Adam (our human life, as we call it) is a totally worthless and useless thing in the sight of God, so far as producing anything that lasts or endures. This is the unquestioned statement of Scripture: All that is of any value in your life or mine, all that will in any degree go toward satisfying that hunger in our hearts to do something worthwhile, can only stem from the activity of Jesus Christ dwelling in us. That is the great theme of Romans 6, 7, & 8. To paraphrase the little motto that you see on the wall occasionally,

Only one life, t'will soon be past,
Only what is done **by** Christ will last

The nation Israel becomes the example of that in Romans 9.

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As you know, one of the basic characteristics of our human nature is that we have a tendency to fix up the outside of our life and to let the inside take care of itself. In other words, as long as we can get men to approve of what we are doing, we feel that God certainly ought to -- and this ought to be acceptable to him. Especially is this true if we have a great religious heritage that we can display before anyone who is interested --

- If we have been baptized by the right mode,
- If we belong to the right church,
- If we worship in the proper way,
- If we read the correct version of the Scriptures,
- If we observe the accepted taboos,
- If we sing the best hymns at the correct tempo,
- If we give heartily and heavily to missions --

then we think that certainly we ought to be acceptable to God!

I find that some people simply cannot believe that you can do all these things and still God would be totally unimpressed by it. This was the mistake that Israel made as a nation, and they are a picture for us of the mistake that many people continue to make today.

Unavailing Privilege:

We have in Romans 9 the prime example of *unavailing privilege*. Paul says:

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ [I think we will take the marginal reading here as more suited to the context], who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen {Rom 9:1-5 RSV}

Here is Paul, the great authority on Judaism, listing for us the remarkable privileges that Jews have enjoyed as a people. There are eight special marks of God's favor:

1. They are the only nation in all the earth of whom God said, "Thou art my son," {Psa 2:7 KJV}. They had a *sonship* relationship to God.
2. They had *the glory* -- they had seen the glory of God revealed. That is an amazing statement, but time after time God had appeared in glory unto this people, and no other nation can make that claim.
3. They had *the covenants*: All the covenants, the agreements that God made with men, were made with Jews, made with the nation Israel. God never made covenants with Gentiles.
4. The *law* was theirs. The Law -- the greatest statement of the character of God that we have outside the New Testament -- is the Ten Commandments, and this was given to Israel on Mount Sinai.
5. To them was also given *the worship*, i.e., the divinely prescribed temple ritual -- the only divinely given religious system in the world was that given to Israel -- all others are cheap, man-made substitutes. But to Israel was given, by God, a divinely prescribed system of sacrifices and rituals.
6. To them also was given *the promises* of the kingdom glory, that they would be, at last, the head of the nations -- and God's kingdom would be centered in them.
7. The *patriarchs* -- i.e., the fathers -- were all Jews: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David; all of them.
8. Finally, as the supreme thing, and the climax of their religious favor, God himself chose to enter the human race *in the person of Jesus Christ* through them. This is a remarkable thing!

What a heritage this is!

The Value of Ancestry:

When I was a student at seminary, a Jewish Christian evangelist spoke to the seminary student body. He told us about a time when he was in Boston speaking to a group of Christians and non-Christians meeting together in a private home.

After the meeting a very prim and austere lady came up to him -- one of these people that Dr. Ironside used to call "a female dreadnought." She steamed up under full power to this Jew, and said to him, "Sir, I am not all interested in what you have to say. You talk about this gospel as though I needed something. I want you to know that I am from one of the finest families in Boston, and our people have been here in this country from the beginning. My ancestors came over on the Mayflower, and I have a great ancestry."

He looked at her, and said, "Lady, you have an ancestry? Why, you don't know what an ancestry is! You trace your ancestry back to the Mayflower, some 300 years ago. I have an ancestry that goes back to Abraham -- some 4,000 years ago -- I am a Jew. But my ancestry did me no good at all!"

The Emptiness of Mere Religion:

This is exactly the picture that Paul is drawing here. What saddened the apostle beyond measure was that, with all this religious privilege and favor, the Jews were actually further from God than the Gentiles who didn't have any of this. The most religious nation that was ever on the face of the earth was Israel (it still is today), yet they did not know God. Isn't that amazing? It certainly shows the emptiness of mere religion, as favored and as genuine as it may be.

The fact that Israel did not know God was amply demonstrated in the treatment that they gave the Apostle Paul. They hounded him, harried him, persecuted him, opposed him, tormented him everywhere he went. Yet there is not one word of bitterness here, not one word of resentment against this people. So filled is Paul with the Spirit of Christ that he can only say that I wish that it were possible to send me to hell in order that he might save all my brethren in Israel! I don't think there is any statement in the Scriptures that more fully declares the fact that Paul was filled with the Spirit than this; it is a thoroughly divine statement.

Poor Israel! They thought that, because they had descended from Abraham, they were God's children -- that they automatically became children of God. But, instead, they were bitter, proud, self-deceived, and boasting in these empty privileges, and Paul's heart goes out to them because of that.

Does this mean, since Israel was in this condition, that God was not true to his promises to Abraham?

Does it mean that God meant to save all of Israel, as it sounds like from some of the Scriptures of the Old Testament, but somehow he just couldn't do it?

Paul says, "No!"

The problem was that Israel misunderstood the basis of salvation -- and many people are doing the very same thing today.

Unpredictable Election:

In this next section, Paul shows us the true basis of God's method and plan of salvation among men. This basis we can set forth in two words -- *unpredictable election* :

But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of promise are reckoned as descendants. For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son." And not only so, but also when Rebecca had

conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she was told, "The elder will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." {Rom 9:6-13 RSV}

(Here we have come to the top of the first section of the roller coaster, so hang on!)

Paul says it is not that the promises have failed, but, rather, that God does not choose men on the basis of anything that man does, or is, at all!

There is a lady in this church who says frequently to me, "I ask myself every day, 'Who am I that God should ever be so good to me?' Or, 'What have I done? Why should he be so kind to me?'" She has been asking me that question for ten years, and I still can't answer her.

The reason is because of what Paul brings out here -- that the Jews were obviously wrong in thinking that God chose men because they were descendants of Abraham (notice his argument). He says that, obviously, it can't be on that basis because God chose Isaac but didn't choose Ishmael -- and both of them were sons of Abraham. Only, as he says, the children of promise are acceptable to God -- only those born out of God's activity, not from man's activity, are going to be accepted before God.

In other words, nobody is *born* a Christian. They can't be! It isn't natural birth that fits us for the kingdom of God; it is divine birth alone. Those who have been acted upon by God's Spirit to create a new birth are the children of promise.

Isaac was born after nature was dead in the case of his father and mother. They were so old that they could not have children by natural means; they had long passed that time. And then Isaac was born -- it wasn't by anything that they did -- Abraham and Sarah had nothing to do with it. It was completely and wholly God's activity. And, when Isaac was born, he was not only physically the child of promise, but spiritually as well. Ishmael was rejected. God chose Isaac and not Ishmael. Therefore, it could not be on the basis of being descendants of Abraham.

Not Foreknowledge:

Moreover, neither is it on the basis of God's foreknowledge of what men will do that he chooses them. This is where many people feel that we have an explanation of why God chooses some and not others. They say he looks ahead and sees what they are going to do, and, because of his foreknowledge, he chooses them.

No, it is not that! Paul says so!

Before Jacob and Esau were born, when they had done no good or evil at all, God chose Jacob and not Esau -- and these were twin boys. You see, it is not a question of what man's character, or his work, may be. While these boys were yet in their mother's womb, God chose to bless Jacob and accept him, and to reject Esau and allow him to remain under the curse of the Adamic sin in which he was born.

Well, you say, he foreknew that Jacob would be a good man and that Esau would be a bad man. No, he didn't. If you read the record very clearly, you can see that, in many ways, Esau was a much better man than Jacob. If we had our choice of which one to live with, I certainly would choose Esau rather than Jacob. Jacob was a schemer, a rascal, a usurper, always working underhandedly to see what advantage he could take of someone -- and he did this all his life.

No, God didn't choose them because one of them was better than the other. Both of them were equally depraved at this point, and they were equally lost. Yet God chose to save Jacob but not Esau. Therefore he says, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

I know that this quotation is taken from the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, and it has

been pointed out that this was written long after Jacob and Esau had lived, and that this was God's conclusion after he had seen all that they were going to be and all that their descendants were going to be. But that is, of course, to ignore God's foreknowledge; he knew that all along. No, that is putting the cart before the horse:

- Men are not good and then God chooses them,
- Men are good only because God has chosen them --

that is the point. The whole teaching of Scripture is that our fallen nature is such that it cannot please God, and, until God begins to operate upon our lives, there is nothing that we can do to please him.

You see how clearly Paul sets that forth. Now notice specifically that he says that God's basis of reference is not man's work, but simply God's own choice, his calling:

... though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, {Rom 9:11 RSV}

this choice was made.

This is what our Lord Jesus meant when he said to Nicodemus, "The wind [or the Spirit] blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it [you can trace the activity but you can't predict it, you don't know where it is going to strike next]; so it is with the Spirit," {John 3:8 RSV}. The Spirit of God moves according to his own will, and only that. No man can predict or control where he is going to go.

It is not that God looks forward to see what good man will do and *then* chooses them. They cannot do any good until God's Spirit in his sovereign will begins to move upon their life and heart. Unless you begin there in your theology, you will get nowhere in the study and understanding of God's work and character.

Unchallengeable Sovereignty:

Now we come to the next section, which we call *unchallengeable sovereignty* :

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But, who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" {Rom 9:14-21 RSV}

With this we begin to grasp the fact that God does not intend to save all men. He never did. He reserves the right to choose whom he will save.

Then, immediately, someone says, "That's not fair! Everyone should have an equal chance to be saved, and God is unjust." This is what Paul faces here. The fact that Paul raises this issue right at this point is proof that he intended us to understand that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau on no other basis than his own will -- otherwise he wouldn't raise this question.

If, as some people say, God foresaw that Jacob would believe in him, and then chose him because of that knowledge, then, of course, it would be a very reasonable thing to choose him, and no one would ever raise this objection and say that God was unjust. But it is the very fact that our fallen nature rebels at this idea that indicates that this is exactly what God says he does.

God's Word to Moses:

Paul refers to God's words to Moses in Verse 15: "He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion,' {cf, Exod 33:19}.

I think it is very helpful for us to remember *when* God said this to Moses. It is taken from the book of Exodus, and, if you look in the 33rd chapter, you will see that this was at the time when Israel was at Mount Sinai. Moses had been up on the mountain with God getting the Law; he had been there for forty days and forty nights. While he was up on the mountain, down at the foot of the mountain Aaron and some of the leaders of Israel listened to requests of the people and decided that they would make a god for them to worship. Ignoring all the mighty acts that God had done for them, and his revelation of his own person and being to them, and though they had seen the mountain shaking and quaking, and the fire and the noise and thunder that had proceeded from it, nevertheless this people had turned to idolatry.

They asked Aaron to make them a god, and Aaron collected all the jewelry in the camp, and melted it, and made a golden calf. Then the people began to dance around the golden calf just as the pagans around them did, in a voluptuous riot of sensuality, stripping off their clothes until they were naked, and running about this god and worshipping it in the most horrible form of heathen idolatry.

When Moses came down from the mountain with the Law in his hands, he was tremendously angry -- he was furious at this -- he dashed the Law in pieces and went up to the top of the mountain again.

God was angry with his people, but Moses began to intercede, and God pointed out that even Moses could not intercede for people like this. Israel had lost every vestige of any possible claim they had upon God. They had forfeited every possible right.

Then God retreated into his sovereignty, and said to Moses in Exodus 33:19 (paraphrased): "I will bless whom I will bless, I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy, and I will show compassion to whomever I want to show compassion."

The only hope that Israel had of escaping the just doom that was hanging over their heads (there stood nothing between them and the wrath of God at all) was God's sovereign choice that he would not show his wrath, but that, instead, he would have mercy.

So God's election, you see, operates against the background of a people who had lost all rights, and all claims, upon his mercy, he just shows it as he wills.

Again, the basis of salvation is stated for us here:

- It is not that man wills, or chooses,
- It is not that God foresees that you are going to choose Christ,
- It is not that man tries or exerts himself or attempts to find God.

It is simply that it is God's choice to show mercy on whom he will. The fact that a man wills to believe, or that he tries to please God, is simply *an indication that God is at work*, but these things are not the reason why he works.

A Testimony:

There comes to mind the story of a man who was giving a testimony at a meeting, and he told how God had sought him and finally found him. This man became a Christian, and he was testifying to the grace and joy that was his.

When he sat down, the leader of the meeting, a man with rather a legal turn of mind, said:

"Now, brother, you have told us about God's part in the way you became a Christian, but you never mentioned your part. When I became a Christian I had to read the Bible, and I had to seek, and I had to pray, and I had to do all these other things, and you have not mentioned anything about them."

And the other man was on his feet at once. He said:

"Yes, you are right. I didn't mention anything about my part. Well, my part, sir, was running away from God for thirty years, and his part was running after me until he found me."

Now, I don't know where he got his theology, but it was very straight and clear -- and it is exactly what Paul sets forth here.

Pharaoh:

At this point in the chapter, Pharaoh is brought in to show the other side of it. Moses and the story of Israel is there to show how God shows mercy upon whom he will, but Pharaoh is brought in to show that God hardens whom he will.

We are told that God raised him up for this very purpose, i.e., he put him on the throne for that purpose. It doesn't mean that he caused him to be born in order that he might be lost -- God never does that -- but he put him on the throne in order that Pharaoh's stubbornness and obstinacy would be the background by which God's power and grace might be displayed.

I know that the Old Testament says over ten times that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but Paul knew those Scriptures and Paul doesn't refer to that part of it. Paul picks up this phrase about God hardening Pharaoh's heart because he clearly means to indicate that Pharaoh was lost because God did not choose to show mercy on him -- and Pharaoh, of course, wouldn't *want* the mercy of God until God *did* begin to act upon his life and heart.

Now do you see the picture? Moses and Pharaoh both belong to the same guilty lump of humanity. Moses was not inherently any better than Pharaoh was. Neither of them had any claim on God -- so God was free to exercise his sovereign right to ***choose Moses*** but ***not to choose Pharaoh***, and he did just that.

The Charge:

Right here somebody says, "Well, look, if I can't believe until God chooses to act upon me, then why does he condemn me for not believing?" This is invariably the charge that man brings against God, and you will notice that this is exactly what Paul brings in here.

**You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"
{Rom 9:19 RSV}**

This is the question that men ask.

Questions in Bible Classes:

Many, many times in Bible classes, when we are wrestling with these themes of election and predestination, someone who is there, understandably, raises this issue.

I have heard them say, "Now, look, did God know that man would sin when he made him?"

And the answer, of course, is "Yes," because he knows all things. He knows the end from the beginning. God knew that man would sin when he made him. He didn't make him sin, but he knew that he would.

Then the question is, "If that is true, why did God make man so he could sin?" I have had that asked me scores of times, and, usually, the one who asks it looks around with a rather self-satisfied look that says, "Well, that

ought to settle your hash." And it sounds logical and unanswerable, doesn't it? It makes unbelief sound so reasonable and just. Why, of course I can't believe until God chooses to allow me to believe; therefore there is nothing that he can blame me for. Fine!

But Paul goes behind that question to show its true character; he shows that it is really an attempt to put all the blame on God, and, thus, to make the creature more righteous than the creator, so that man becomes more just than God. It is really man saying to God,

"Look, God, step down from that throne a little bit. I want to talk to you. I have a few questions to ask you. Sit down here; I want to give you the third degree. Now, tell me this: What right have you to make me this way?"

This is simply another way of saying, "You have no right to be God," for a God that is not sovereign is no God at all! When we talk about God, we are talking about a sovereign being, and *sovereignty* means "the right to do what you will without giving an answer or reason to anybody." And God must be that kind of a being or he is no God at all! Anyone who asks this question, or who raises this issue (as Paul brings it out here) is really saying, or demanding, that God submit himself to man's will, and, of course, that makes man God.

This is the great lie of the Devil -- that man could be God. This was the great temptation by which he subverted and betrayed the original couple.

The Potter and the Clay:

Paul goes on to show that, within the limits of man's finiteness, he exercises the same kind of sovereignty that he tries to deny to God. This is illustrated in the matter of the potter and the clay.

Doesn't the potter have the right to take a lump of clay, divide it in half, take half of the lump and make a beautiful vessel that is designed for display in a living room, and take the other half and make a slop jar or something for the kitchen? Doesn't he have this right? Yes, he does. The potter has the right to do with the clay as he wishes -- this is Paul's argument.

"Well," someone says, "but clay is not human beings; clay is an unfeeling substance without will. We human beings have a will, and we have feelings."

Well, then take man's relationship to the plants and animals -- these are living beings. Doesn't a gardener have the right to dig up a bush and throw it away if he doesn't like it, or to plant it in another part of the garden, or to take up this tree and plant another in its place? Do we deny him that right? Does anyone challenge his right?

If a farmer has cattle, does he not have the right to divide a certain number off and send them to market to be slaughtered, while he saves others for another two or three years? Does anybody question his right? You see, this is sovereignty.

You housewives, when you have flies come into your home, don't you have the right to either shoo them out the door or swat them with a flyswatter, one or the other? We exercise this kind of sovereignty all the time -- and we are only creatures -- but man in his pride and arrogance refuses to grant this same sovereignty to the only being who has the right to exercise it whenever he chooses. Now, when we call God, "God," we mean that he is *sovereign*, and if he is sovereign, then he can make man to be whatever he chooses him to be. To deny that is to deny God his godhood and to make man a god in his place.

Unanswerable Grace:

Finally, we will see how he exercises that sovereignty, because, of course, it all rests on the character of God. What kind of a sovereign being do we have? So, in this last section, we have what we may call *unanswerable grace* :

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with

much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea,

**"Those who were not my people
I will call 'my people,'
and her who was not beloved
I will call 'my beloved.'"**

"And in the very place where it was said to them 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" [God's saving grace is going to move among the Gentiles.]

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea [as God promised Abraham], only a remnant of them will be saved [because it is the children of promise that are saved, not the children of Abraham]; for the Lord will execute his sentence upon the earth with rigor and dispatch." And as Isaiah predicted,

**"If the Lord of hosts had not left us children,
we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorah." {Rom 9:22-29 RSV}**

The simple truth is that if God did not move upon man's will to make us believe, not one man in all of time would ever be saved. Jesus said, "No man can come unto me except my Father draw him, and all that my Father had given me shall come unto me," {cf, John 6:44, 65}. That is the same thought, the same teaching.

"Well," someone says, "you are teaching that God elects some to be saved and others to be damned." No, not so. All are lost already, and God is not responsible for that. God never elected man to be damned, that was man's own choice. The only time that man ever exercised his own free will was when Adam chose to accept the principle that the Devil set before him and to act independently of God. The moment that man made that choice he plunged himself -- and the entire race of men following -- into the natural results of that decision.

If I had sitting before me here this morning a glass of poison that I knew would kill me, I would have the choice of whether to drink it or not. But once I drank it I no longer would have any exercise of free will -- I must reap the results -- and this is the condition that God says the human race is in.

Having drunk of the dregs of independence from God, at the instigation of Satan, man is plunged into the darkness and the depths of fallen humanity, and it is only God's saving, electing grace that calls *any* out at all. It is not God's hardening that deprives a soul of salvation; that merely leaves him in the state that he is already in. But if God did not move in mercy, we would all be like Sodom and Gomorah -- blasted, corrupted, ruined, and burned.

Think about that for awhile when you think over this matter of God's electing grace.

You see, if we find fault with God for saving some but not all, we are really asserting that men have a right to be saved, that they deserved to have mercy shown them. But the truth is that we deserve nothing but hell -- all of us!

As long as we demand that God consult us about our salvation, we slam the door to discovering his grace. But if we are willing to let God be God, and be sovereign in the exercise of his will, then we begin to see what it costs God to save men -- not only the darkness and the anguish and the loneliness of the cross, but, as Paul points out, even today God is long-suffering in his patient dealing with evil men. God is putting up with all the foulness and hatred and enmity of man.

- Listen to a conversation around you sometime,
- Listen to people talk about God,
- Listen to the way they take his name and cast it into the dirt and walk over it -- the very one in whose hand is their very breath,
- Listen to the way they speak in arrogant independence of him, and act as though they have the right to

- do whatever they want to with the very body he created, and died to redeem,
- Listen to that, and then think of how many centuries God has been waiting patiently with that attitude!

God could stop evil any time he chose. With but a flick of his finger he could wipe out the whole human race, but he doesn't do it.

And why doesn't he? Because, as Paul says here, he desires

... to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, {Rom 9:22b-23 RSV}

Those verses suggest that, in order that some might be saved, there must be some who are lost. I don't understand this. I don't think anyone does. But I leave this with the sovereign choice of God who is willing to put up with all that man throws at him, century after century, in patient endurance, in order that he might bring to fulfillment the desires of his heart in the salvation of some.

Now, you will notice that it doesn't say that God made men fitted for destruction. No, he didn't. Adam did that, and men have helped him along ever since. But

- Wherever man feels a hunger for God,
- Wherever he finds faith in his heart to believe the record of the Scripture concerning Jesus Christ,
- Wherever man grows weary of his selfishness and of evil,

there is where the wind of the Spirit of God is blowing, wooing and fitting the man or woman, little by little, "to be a vessel of mercy prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called."

Prayer:

Our Father, these are mighty themes, far beyond our limited understanding, but we thank you for the simple fact that if were not for your saving grace, not one of us would be here this morning, for there is none who seek God, none who really want to be holy and right and true, except as your Spirit does breathe upon us and create that desire in the first place. We thank you for that. We pray that any here who sense the moving of the Spirit -- who are hungry for you, who want to be right, and who want to be forgiven -- may recognize as well that this is the very indication that you do intend them to be forgiven and will find in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams, and the fulfillment of those passions awakened in them by thy Holy Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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