

Election in Romans Chapter Nine

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Definitive Passage

Among the passages of Scripture most commonly cited as favoring the Calvinist/Reformed conception of salvation (e.g., Ephesians 1:3-14 and various statements by Jesus in the Gospel of John come to mind as bulwark passages for Calvinism in this regard), Romans chapter nine is considered by many to be the *definitive* passage, particularly in regard to the doctrine of unconditional, particular election of individuals to salvation. Calvin himself referred to Romans 9:6-24 as “that memorable passage from Paul which alone ought easily to compose all controversy [concerning election] among sober and compliant children of God” (*Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, Translated by J. K. S. Reid. London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1961. 5:3). Many others since have concurred with Calvin, assuming that the Apostle Paul’s words in Romans chapter nine deals a death blow to Arminianism and all forms of synergism between God and man in the matter of salvation.

Various Arminian theologians, however, have noted lingering difficulties with the standard Calvinist account of Romans chapter nine. Perhaps the largest such difficulty is how to reconcile the Calvinist understanding of Romans 9:6-24 with the *rest* of Romans, in particular with chapter eleven, where there are clear indications that the divine election to salvation should be understood in contingent rather than absolute terms (see, e.g., Robert Shank’s comments, *Elect in the Son*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1970, 1989, pp. 117ff).¹

In this essay I will offer a detailed exegesis of Romans chapter nine, as well as exegeses of certain related passages (e.g., Romans chapter eleven) that provide critical context for Romans chapter nine. It is my belief that Calvinists have fundamentally misunderstood Paul’s intentions in this crucial passage of Scripture. Having said that, I will spend very little time in this essay directly or formally critiquing the Calvinist interpretation of the passage (or other existing interpretations, for that matter), but will attempt to focus on the biblical text itself, allowing relevant theological implications to unfold along the way. Thus, I assume in this essay a basic

familiarity with the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional, particular election on the part of the reader. Once I have established here what I consider to be the most responsible interpretation of Romans chapter nine, I then hope in a future essay to compare and contrast my approach more directly to select other published exegeses of this passage that differ from my own (e.g., those of Calvin, Arminius, Shank, Piper, Reymond, and Schreiner).²

The bottom line of the interpretation for which I will argue in this essay is that the bulk of Romans chapter nine, which deals with God's unilateral, noncontingent dispensing of grace, on the one hand, and of hardening, on the other hand, refers not to an election or nonelection to ultimate salvation (as Calvinists argue) but instead to *God's sovereign dispensing of (resistible) particular prevenient grace* (see below for definitions), specifically to the physical descendants of Israel as the recipients of "the oracles of God" (Romans 3:2). When Paul does later in the passage deal instead with the divine dispensing of *saving grace* (in 9:22f and chapter eleven), it is clear that such saving grace is dispensed contingent on faith, as Arminians contend.

Definitions

Before proceeding to a consideration of the context of Romans chapter nine and a detailed exegesis of the passage below, it may be helpful to first offer the reader definitions of some of the key concepts to be employed in this essay. The most important of these is the notion of *prevenient grace* (lit., preceding, or anticipatory grace) a term which has traditionally been used (especially by Arminians) to refer to the grace of God extended to a person *prior to* salvation (i.e., prior to God's dispensing of *saving grace*, by which a person is justified and regenerated). Prevenient grace serves both to *draw* a person to faith and repentance and to *enable* that person to exercise such faith and repentance, by which he may then be saved. Without such prevenient grace, it is impossible for the natural, unregenerate man to exercise an authentic faith decision toward God (John 6:44; 15:5).

Two of the main points in regard to prevenient grace on which Calvinists and Arminians have traditionally differed are as follows. First, theologians have differed over whether grace preceding salvation is *irresistible* or else *resistible*. Calvinists, who generally avoid the term "prevenient grace" and instead subsume certain aspects of this concept under the notion "effectual calling" (cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, X/i-ii, iv), argue that any preceding grace that has salvation in view is irresistible or efficacious, such that any person to whom this preceding grace is dispensed will necessarily be led to faith and repentance and become a

recipient of saving grace. This follows from the Calvinist understanding of the divine decree, by which God unconditionally determines who will and will not be saved, and foreordains all of the means necessary (including the dispensing of efficacious grace) to bring about this result in the elect. Arminians, in contrast, argue that prevenient grace is resistible; that is, though prevenient grace serves to grant a person the opportunity to move toward God in faith and repentance and indeed enables that person to make such movements, prevenient grace does not itself *compel* or otherwise *necessitate* a particular response on the part of that person. The person still retains an authentically free agency by which he may resist the prevenient grace extended by God and reject the opportunity to exercise faith and repentance.

Second, theologians have differed over whether prevenient or preceding grace having salvation in view is extended only to *particular* individuals or is instead extended *universally* to all. Calvinists adopt the former position, which is indeed a corollary of their belief that such preceding grace (subsumed under the “effectual call”) is irresistible and efficacious. Arminians have tended toward the latter position, as following from the Arminian conviction that God’s desire for all people to be saved constrains him to extend to all people an authentic opportunity to respond in faith to him.

Given that my exegesis below yields an analysis supporting the basic Arminian tenets, it will come as no surprise that I identify prevenient grace as both resistible and universal in nature. My analysis departs significantly from other Arminian analyses, however, in that my exegesis of Romans chapter nine leads me to view prevenient grace as including not only a universally dispensed form, but *also* an additional particular form dispensed selectively to some people but not to others. This *particular prevenient grace* is dispensed solely at God’s sovereign discretion according to his own good purposes, yet it is still resistible in regard to its preparatory effect for salvation; that is, the recipients of such grace by no means all choose to exercise faith and repentance. In contrast, *saving grace*, according to my exegesis of various portions of Romans below, is dispensed by God to all and only believers contingent on their authentically-free exercise of faith.

The concept of *election* as it is employed in Romans may be associated with the divine dispensing either of particular prevenient grace or of saving grace (i.e., those forms of grace that are not universally distributed). Election can thus be said to occur anytime God discriminates in the selection of the recipients of his grace (i.e., when he selects some but not others to receive that grace). God always elects according to criteria; that is, in view of God’s wisdom and intentional nature his election is assumed never to be capricious or arbitrary. The criteria

according to which God selects the recipients of his grace may be either of two main types: (1) the criteria may make reference to the free will of the recipient, or factors that derive from the exercise of the recipient's will, such as the presence of faith in the recipient, or (2) the criteria of selection may make reference only to factors not directly associated with the exercise of the recipient's will, such as God's own greater purposes for an individual, a group, or the whole of humanity. If the criteria are of the former type, we may say that the election is *conditioned* or *contingent*, by which we mean more specifically that the election is conditioned at least in part on factors arising directly from the exercise of the recipient's will. If instead the criteria for election exclude human volitional factors of this sort, we may say that the election is *unconditioned* or *noncontingent*, by which we mean more specifically that the election is not conditioned on factors directly associated with the exercise of the recipient's will.³ In the latter case we may also say that God has acted *unilaterally*, his election in such an instance not being contingent upon any volitional act of the recipient. My exegesis of Romans nine and associated passages below leads me to conclude that particular prevenient grace is dispensed unilaterally on an unconditioned (noncontingent) basis (though see NOTE 10 below), whereas saving grace is dispensed on a conditioned basis with respect to any given individual, contingent upon the faith of the recipient.

The Context Preceding Romans 9

With the above concepts in mind, we can now lay the preparatory groundwork for an exegesis of Romans chapter nine by considering the relevant context that precedes this chapter. Paul began in the first two chapters of Romans by exploring the basis for the revelation of God's wrath "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18). Paul argues that this is true not only of Gentiles but also of Jews as well, for all who fail to keep the terms of God's Law (whether the external, written Law, or the internal Law witnessed by the human conscience; 2:12, 14-15) fall equally under God's wrath, whether Jew or Gentile. From this it follows that one's spiritual relationship with God is based not on external rites or physical lineage, but rather on the inward condition of one's heart: "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).

It is this radical clarification here in 2:28-29 of what it means to be a true spiritual "Jew," a definition potentially encompassing both physical Jews and physical Gentiles, that provokes in

the opening verses of chapter three certain questions that will later become the central focus of Romans chapters nine through eleven. Specifically, Paul's assertion that Gentiles and Jews alike can participate in a true spiritual Jewish lineage raises questions concerning the status of physical Jews and their place in God's plan of salvation for humanity. If the lineage that counts is spiritual in nature, then is there any advantage at all to being a physical descendant of Israel (3:1)? Does the failure of some physical Jews to participate in the spiritual Jewish lineage of which Paul speaks mean that God has failed to keep his promises to the Jewish patriarchs (3:3)?

Paul offers only a cursory response to these questions in the first part of chapter three (see 3:2, 4), because of his eagerness to move quickly into a fuller discussion of faith in Jesus Christ as being the basis for true spiritual Jewish lineage. Paul's pressing concern in this section of Romans is to show that it is faith, not any works of merit based on Law-keeping, that results in our justification before God and consequent participation in the true spiritual lineage (3:28; 4:2-5). This discussion of faith as the basis for justification takes up the greater part of chapters three through five, after which Paul discusses in chapters six through eight how our identification with Christ through faith yields not only a legal freedom from the penalty of sin, but also an active freedom from the power and tyranny of sin in our lives. The key to this active victory over sin is dependence on the Holy Spirit, whom God gives to all the true children of God (8:12-14).

In his discussion of the privileges accruing to the children of God (8:14f), Paul is inevitably drawn into a consideration of God's ultimate end and purpose for his children, namely, their participation in the glory of Christ (8:17). In one sense, God's children already possess a measure of this glory, though it is at present hidden and not yet revealed (8:19; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6-11; 5:1-5; see my devotional "Hidden Glory"). The full revelation of this glory awaits the future day of adoption when the children of God receive the redemption of their bodies (8:23). It is within this consideration of God's ultimate purpose for his children that Paul for the first time in this epistle touches on the concept of election in 8:28-30:

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. 29 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; 30 and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Paul makes clear here that the glorification of his children is accomplished by their being *conformed to the image of Christ*, their elder brother. This "purpose" of God (8:28) comes about

only through the intentional intervention of God. Speaking of those “who love God” (8:28), Paul states that God has “foreknown” them (i.e., loved and chosen them beforehand), “predestined” them (i.e., acted with the previously arranged goal in mind of conforming them to the image of Christ), “called” them (i.e., invited them to participation in the covenant of salvation), “justified” them (i.e., declared them forgiven and holy through the redemptive work of Christ), and ultimately “glorified” them (i.e., in reference to their present and future participation in the glory of Christ through their union with him and conformance to his image). This range of God’s intentional action for the sake of bringing about the salvation and glory of his beloved children leads Paul to rejoice in their security and victory in Christ. No charge can be brought against these “elect” (8:33), and no external power can separate them from the love of God in Christ (8:38-39).

Paul’s effusion of praise and rejoicing in 8:31-39 brings us to the very doorstep of chapter nine, where Paul will dramatically shift gears and return to the question originally broached in 3:1f, a question which has become more pressing now in view of all that Paul has said in the interim about the glorious status of believers in Christ, the true spiritual “Jews,” who know “the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39). That question, namely, is “Where does all of this leave the *physical* Jews, to whom God made promises through the patriarchs? Has God abandoned entirely his prior agreements with the physical descendants of Israel?” (cf. 9:1-6a)

Before we begin considering Paul’s extended response to this question in chapter nine, however, we need to pause first and take a closer look at Paul’s statements in 8:29-30. Many interpreters have seen in these verses substantial support for the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional, particular election of individuals to salvation, given that God is said to “foreknow” and “predestine” his children, all of whom are likewise “called,” “justified,” and “glorified.” This may seem to refer to a set number and identity of individuals whom God has elected beforehand to participate in salvation.⁴

There is a viable alternative interpretation, however, that does not yield the above conclusion. Namely, we may view the election here in Romans 8:28-29 as *corporate* rather than individual in nature.⁵ From the corporate perspective, election does not have in view the selection of individuals per se (not even an aggregate of individuals insofar as they might be considered as *individuals*). Instead, from the corporate perspective election has in view the establishment of a Body, family, nation, or other group whose corporate identity is determined strictly in relation to a given Head, patriarch, or other antecedent. The election of the Israelites to a privileged status in God’s economy may be viewed in this light. The corporate identity of the Israelites was

established on the basis of their physical descent from the patriarch Jacob (Israel), to whom the promises of election were made. In the case of the Church (which is in view here in Romans 8:28-29), the Head from which the Church gains its corporate identity is Christ, and his Body is comprised of all those who are in spiritual union with him through faith (Ephesians 1:4-6, 22-23; John 15; 1 Peter 2:9-10). Considered from this corporate perspective, election does not itself determine the specific identity of the individuals who will participate in the corporate body; instead, election establishes only the grounds on which the Body will be comprised in relation to the Head (i.e., through physical descent in the case of Israel, though spiritual union contingent on the faith of the individual in the case of the Church; see the discussions of Romans chapters four and eleven below).

It is at this corporate level that God is said to decree election *beforehand*, from all eternity. This is true both of the election through Jacob of physical Israel (who are said to be “foreknown” as a people; i.e., corporately chosen beforehand by God; Romans 11:2) and of the election through Christ of his Body, who are similarly said to be “foreknown” here in Romans 8:29 and “chosen in Him [i.e., Christ], before the foundation of the world” in Ephesians 1:4. Notice that this prior election of believers is said to be “in Him” (i.e., in Christ). As just argued above, this is not a prior election of individuals in their own right, but instead applies to individuals *only insofar as they are considered in union with Christ*, as members of his corporate Body (cf. Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, pp. 45-55). There is a similar corporate emphasis in the other Scriptural term referring to a prior determination in regard to believers: *predestination*. Believers are said to be “predestined to become conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Romans 8:29). Whereas the term “foreknown” emphasizes God’s prior choice or election of *believers* corporately to be those who will share in the blessings of Christ, the term “predestined” stresses his prior determination of the goal of that election, namely, that believers will come to corporately share the character of Christ in love, holiness, and truth (be “conformed to his image”). This corporate nature of predestination, often overlooked in theological discussions, can be clearly seen in Ephesians 4:11-16, where it is the “body of Christ” considered as a whole (i.e., not merely individual believers) that is said to grow “to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” The “fullness of Christ” mentioned here is the same conformity to Christ mentioned in Romans 8:29 as being the goal of predestination. (I hope to explore more fully this corporate nature of predestination to the image of Christ in a future essay.)

My point, then, in regard to Romans 8:28-30 is that the entire passage makes reference to the elect Body of Christ from the corporate perspective described above, not from an individual

perspective. Paul is not saying that God determined beforehand the specific individuals who will go through the stages described in verses 29-30. Instead, Paul is stressing *the faithfulness of God to intentionally achieve his purpose of establishing a glorified corporate Body of believers bearing the image of his Son*. Paul does not in these verses address the question of on what basis the membership of that Body is to be comprised, or whether this basis for membership may be sensitive to factors contingent on the exercise of human free will. Those questions Paul answers elsewhere in chapter four and again in chapter eleven; to wit, that union with Christ for any given individual is contingent on that individual's free exercise of and perseverance in faith (see discussion of these passages below).

Analysis of Romans 9:1-5

It is immediately after the crescendo in 8:28-39 celebrating the security of believers in Christ that Paul turns his attention to his Jewish contemporaries, the majority of whom were *not* participating in this spiritual relationship with Christ through faith. It is this stark contrast between the elect believers in Christ and the unbelieving Jews of Paul's day that provides the backdrop for all of Romans chapters nine through eleven, a point which must be constantly borne in mind when attempting to interpret this section of Scripture. One concern in particular, raised by Paul in 9:6 and echoing the question earlier raised in 3:3, provides the driving force behind most of Paul's discussion in these chapters: *How can God be considered faithful to his original election of the physical descendants of Israel if the majority of these descendants have not turned to Christ in faith?* It is imperative that Romans chapter nine be read in terms of this question, otherwise we will make the mistake that many before us have made of forcing all of Paul's statements into a false mold as relating primarily to the ultimate salvation of the Church and the ultimate reprobation of all others. In fact, however, the bulk of Paul's remarks in this chapter (and many of the related remarks in chapter eleven) are primarily intended to provide an account of the unbelieving state of Paul's Jewish contemporaries, both in terms of how they got to that point in the first place, and in terms of what God still has in store for them. This is not to say that Paul does not deal with theological themes that have implications for the salvation of Gentiles as well; indeed, I will draw some such implications out in my discussion below as they arise. But we must never forget that it is Paul's unbelieving Jewish brethren that fill his view in this chapter. Only then can we hope to accurately follow his train of thought and draw the proper theological lessons from Paul's words.

To begin, then, Paul first expresses his severe sorrow in Romans 9:1-3 over the fact that his

Jewish brethren are mired in unbelief. The special favors that God had given them as the elect descendants of Israel (Jacob), enumerated by Paul in 9:4-5, made their unbelief all the more tragic. Paul's list of these privileges may be taken as an elaboration and extension of his earlier observation in 3:1-2 that the Jews had the "advantage" of having been "entrusted with the oracles of God." Notice in particular here in 9:4-5 Paul's mention of "the promises" given to the Jews, their relation to "the fathers," and their privileged roles of being the earthly guardians of "the Law" and of providing the physical lineage for the appearance of "the Christ." In brief, the Jews had been chosen/elected by God through the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to receive God's Word to humanity and to function as the vehicle to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah, the Savior of both Jews and Gentiles alike. Despite this special status as God's elect, however, Paul clearly viewed the unbelieving Jews of his day as being accursed and separated from Christ (a position he was willing to trade with them; 9:3).

Analysis of Romans 9:6-13

Has the Word of God Failed?

In this section Paul begins to address the main question naturally raised by his observations in 9:1-5, a question that he originally broached in 3:3, where he asked, "If some [of the Jews] did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?" This question resurfaces here in 9:6a and as noted above will guide the remainder of the extended passage through chapter eleven. In essence, the question may be stated as follows: *Does the failure of the majority of the Jews of Paul's day to believe in Jesus mean that God's election of them through the patriarchs has failed?* If the majority of them are in fact "accursed" and excluded from salvation because of their rejection of Christ (as Paul implies in 9:3), then how can they still be considered God's elect, and how can we avoid the conclusion that God has failed in his purpose expressed through his former election of the Jews through the patriarchs?

In chapter three Paul's response to this suggestion that God had failed to meet his commitments was short and emphatic: "May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar" (3:4). Here in chapter nine Paul provides a more in-depth response based on a distinction in 9:8 between two distinct kinds of lineage from the patriarchs; namely, descent according to the "flesh" ("the children of the flesh") versus descent according to the "promise" ("the children of the promise"). Paul suggests that the latter but not the former are the true "children of God" and "descendants" of Abraham (vs. 8b). To prove his point, Paul deals with the two most pertinent examples from the lives of the patriarchs: God's choice/election of Isaac (which entails his nonelection of Abraham's other son Ishmael), and God's choice/election of Jacob (contrasted to his rejection of Esau). The fact that both Ishmael and Esau were descendants of Abraham and yet were numbered as Gentiles rather than members of the elect Jewish lineage forcefully demonstrates Paul's point that God's election does not proceed merely by blind physical descent apart from consideration of God's promise. This is important because it provides Paul a way to explain how the unbelief of the majority of his Jewish contemporaries does not compromise the legitimacy of God's promises to the patriarchs. Because not every Jew is necessarily a descendant *according to promise*, the unbelief of some Jews does not entail that God's promises have failed.

A Problem Not Often Recognized

What I have just described is a fairly standard interpretation of Paul's basic response to the issue raised in 9:6 concerning whether God's promise to the patriarchs has failed. This above account, however, is incomplete. To see why, we need to begin by recognizing an apparent problem in Paul's reasoning that has gone largely unrecognized by commentators on this epistle. While it is true that the examples of Isaac versus Ishmael and Jacob versus Esau demonstrate the insufficiency of physical descent from Abraham to ensure one's status as an elect child of God (vs. 7a), these examples in themselves do not, strictly speaking, rule out the possibility that physical descent from *Israel* (Jacob) guarantees one's status as a member of the elect Israel. That is, it is not clear how these examples square with Paul's statement that "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (vs. 6b). If anything, the examples of the election of Isaac but not Ishmael, and Jacob but not Esau, can be used to actually *support* an appeal to physical descent from Israel (Jacob), given that the election of Isaac and Jacob was made by God for the clear purpose of delimiting a nation of Jews (made up of *all* those physically descended from Israel/Jacob) who would be God's visible covenant people, in distinction from all the Gentiles. While it is easy, then, to see how the election of Isaac and Jacob (and consequent rejection of Ishmael and Esau) demonstrates the truth stated in verse 7a ("neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants"), it is not clear how these same examples taken at literal face value demonstrate the truth stated in verse 6b ("they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel").

The above problem arises because we have until now been assuming, in accordance with the standard interpretation of these verses, that Paul's response to the accusation in verse 6a (viz., that God's word to the patriarchs has failed) is comprised of only one point, namely, that God is still faithful to his promises because only the believing members of physical Israel were ever meant to be considered *truly* elect. Under this standard interpretation, the second of the twin assertions in verses 6b and 7a is taken to be essentially a restatement of the first (i.e., "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" = "neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants"). The solution to the problem raised by this standard interpretation is to recognize that, in fact, verse 7a is *not* simply a restatement of 6b, but is instead a distinct point in response to the question of whether God's promises have failed (these two points of response in vss. 6b and 7a being bridged by the intervening phrase "*neither are*" at the beginning of vs. 7). This twofold response of Paul to the question of God's faithfulness is itself based on two distinct senses of the *promise* made by God to the patriarchs, which in turn correlate to not merely one but two equally valid senses of election. Let us consider these in turn.

The Promise as an Assurance to be Believed

First, Paul considers the promise of God in terms of it being a *God-given assurance in which Abraham was required to put his faith*. It is this sense of the promise that determines the nature of the *spiritual* lineage possessed by Abraham's true children, which in turn comprises the election to salvation of the true spiritual Israel to which Paul refers in 9:6b. Paul has discussed this aspect of the promise earlier in chapter four, where he argued that Abraham was credited with righteousness on the basis of his *faith in God's promise*, not on the basis of any works of the Law (including circumcision), in order that "he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them," as well as "the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham" (4:11-12). In either case, whether Gentile or Jew, it is one's *faith* that makes one a spiritual descendant of Abraham. Paul then related this fact to the promise: "For the *promise* to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but *through the righteousness of faith*" (4:13). The promise "*is by faith*, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law [i.e., to those physically descended from Israel and who thus participate in the promise in the sense to be discussed below], but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham" [i.e., to those who participate in the promise in the sense now being considered] (4:16). Thus, in this first sense God's promise is conditioned on the faith of Abraham's heirs, in that only those who have the faith of Abraham are considered to be of his spiritual "faith lineage."

Thus, when Paul says in 9:6b that "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel," he is taking the point already developed in chapter four and is applying it specifically to the case of the Jewish nation (i.e., the physical descendants of Jacob/Israel), whom Paul has brought into focus in 9:1-6. Based on the arguments in 4:11-16, Paul can now conclude in regard to the Jews that election to participation in the true spiritual nation of Israel is not based on mere physical lineage from the patriarch Israel (Jacob). Instead, election to salvation is conditioned on faith alone, irrespective of one's Jewish or Gentile lineage. This truth provides the first of Paul's responses to the charge alluded to in verse 6a that God's promises must necessarily have failed in view of the unbelief of the Jewish majority. To this charge one can rightly respond that it was never God's intent that those in unbelief, whether Jews or Gentiles, would be numbered among those elected to salvation, this being demonstrated by the example of Abraham, who obtained righteousness on the basis of his faith. Consequently, the unbelief of Paul's Jewish

contemporaries does not entail that God has been unfaithful to his promise.

The Promise as a Unilateral Choice of God

When Paul makes the first assertion above in 9:6b, he assumes that his readers will agree with him on the basis of the arguments already made in 4:11-16. For this reason, Paul proceeds without further comment directly to the second, distinct assertion in verse 7, “neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants.” This second assertion, like the first just discussed above, is rooted in the concept of God’s promise to the patriarchs, but here in verse 7a Paul considers that promise not in terms of its being a God-given assurance to be believed, but in terms of its being *a unilateral choice of God* to determine the *physical lineage of God’s chosen people* (i.e., the Jews, in contrast to all Gentiles). Quoting in verses 7b and 9b (from Genesis 21:12 and 18:10) the various manifestations of the promise as it related to Isaac, and in verse 13 (from Malachi 1:2-3) the promise as it related to Jacob, Paul traces God’s promise showing that the election would be transmitted first through Isaac (not Ishmael) and subsequently through Jacob (not Esau) and his physical descendants. From these examples Paul concludes that the Jews’ election as God’s “children” (vs. 8a) cannot be based on blind physical descent alone. (In regard to the physical Jews being considered God’s “children,” note that the unbelieving Jews, who are “Israelites” [9:4] and Paul’s “kinsmen according to the flesh” [9:3] are, despite their unbelief, said to possess “the adoption as [God’s] sons” in 9:4.)⁶ The Jews, then, are considered God’s “children” not merely “because they are Abraham’s descendants” (vs. 7a); otherwise, Ishmael and Esau, being Abraham’s descendants, would have been equal partners with the Jews as recipients of God’s special favor. The fact that Ishmael and Esau were counted outside the elect family of God indicates that the Jews participate in this election as God’s “children” and “descendants” (lit. “seed,” vs. 8) not merely because they are “children of the flesh” but because they are “children of the *promise*” (vs. 8b). That is, they are elect *in accordance with God’s discriminating promise* to distinguish between Isaac and Ishmael and between Jacob and Esau in the establishment of the physical lineage of God’s chosen people.

It is critical at this juncture to understand that Paul’s statement here in verse 8 does *not* mean that God’s election of the Jews cannot be sensitive to the physical lineage flowing from Jacob, the head of the corporate body of physical Israel. Numerous places in Scripture attest to the validity of God’s election of the *physical* descendants of Jacob. One of these is Malachi 1:1-3, cited by Paul here in Romans 9:13. It is clear in the Malachi passage that God’s “love” of Jacob was an election of all Jacob’s physical descendants and not merely of the man Jacob himself, as seen in Malachi 1:2a where these descendants (i.e., the nation of Israel) are referred to as

recipients of the same divine love given to Jacob. That this election of Jacob and his descendants was irrevocable (cf. Romans 11:29) even in the face of Israel's unbelief is shown by God's words to Israel in Malachi 3:6, "I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." Despite the Jews' pervasive hypocrisy in the days of Malachi, God did not consume (i.e., completely destroy) them because he was bound by his promises to the patriarchs, which, like the Lord himself, "do not change." Elsewhere in Romans Paul himself refers to this same binding election of the physical descendants of Jacob. In addition to several passages already mentioned above (Romans 3:1-3; 9:4-5), note 11:1, 11, 16, and especially 11:28-29, where Paul says that the Jews, who were at the time "enemies" of the Christian believers, are nonetheless "*from the standpoint of God's choice . . . beloved for the sake of the fathers.*" It is clear from such passages that Paul did not discount the value of the Jews' status as physical descendants of Jacob, for this physical descent despite their unbelief allowed them to remain within the scope of God's sovereign election as those "entrusted with the oracles of God" (3:2). Paul's insistence in 9:8, then, that "the children of the promise are regarded as descendants" does not invalidate all consideration of physical lineage; it instead simply distinguishes between blind physical descent, on the one hand, and physical descent *that is in accordance with the promise of God*, on the other hand, where "descent in accordance with the promise" refers to physical lineage that receives the sovereign favor and choice of God. Ishmael and Esau are examples of the first form of physical descent; Isaac and Jacob are examples of the latter.

Given all that has been said above about the two distinct aspects of the promise of God given to the patriarchs, we can now distinguish the following possible varieties of lineage or descent from the patriarchs dealt with by Paul in Romans. Consider carefully:

1. Spiritual descent in accordance with God's promise (i.e., all who are of the faith of Abraham, whether Jew or Gentile)
2. Physical descent in accordance with God's promise (i.e., all physical descendants of [Isaac and] Jacob)
3. Physical descent without reference to God's promise (i.e., all physical descendants of Abraham, including his Gentiles descendants; viz., Ishmael, Esau, and their descendants)

According to Paul, only the first two types of lineage are recognized by God as pertaining to valid forms of divine election. The first type of lineage is the subject of Romans 4:11-16 and Paul's assertion in 9:6b. This type of lineage is associated with election to salvation contingent on faith. The second type of lineage is the subject of Paul's second assertion, that found in Romans 9:7a,

and Paul's subsequent discussion in 9:7b-13. This type of lineage is associated with God's election of physical Israel to be the recipients of the blessings described by Paul in 3:2 and 9:4-5.

This brings us to the core of Paul's second response (in 9:7-13) to the charge against God's faithfulness alluded to in verse 6a. Not only is God still faithful to his promise to the patriarchs considered in the *first* sense of the promise discussed above (i.e., he is faithful to elect to salvation and allow to participate in the true spiritual Israel all those who like Abraham place their faith in God's promise), God also remains faithful to his word in regard to the *second* aspect of that promise, namely, to unilaterally continue extending special divine favor to the physical descendants of Israel by entrusting them to be recipients of both the verbal and the incarnate Word of God. Rather than having rejected his former election of the Jews (as is often but mistakenly assumed about Paul's teaching here), Paul suggests in 9:7-13 that despite their unbelief (cf. 9:2-3; 11:28-29) God remains faithful to his prior election of the physical descendants of Jacob, all of whom are considered "children of God" (cf. Note 6), not by mere blind physical descent from Abraham, but in the sense of being "children of the promise" (i.e., the promise of God by which Isaac and Jacob were chosen to transmit the divinely favored physical lineage; type #2 lineage above). As I will argue below, it is precisely God's faithfulness to his election of the physical descendants of Israel in this way that motivates him to continue pursuing the Jews to bring them to repentance and faith, a goal that Paul teaches in 11:26 will ultimately be accomplished. (Indeed, this continuing election must be recognized in order to properly understand God's present and future plans for the physical descendants of Israel. See the discussion of chapter eleven below.)

I noted above that whereas Paul's first assertion in Romans 9:6b is based on a consideration of God's promise considered as a God-given assurance requiring faith, the subsequent assertion in verse 7a is based on a consideration of God's promise as a *unilateral choice of God*. By this I mean that God's choice of Isaac and Jacob to transmit the favored physical lineage of Israel was not conditioned on any volitional act of Isaac or Jacob themselves that might have distinguished them from Ishmael or Esau. Paul notes in regard to Jacob and Esau that God's choice was made between them while "the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad," (vs. 11), thus ruling out the possibility that the election of Jacob and his physical descendants could have been based on works of merit on their part somehow lacking in Esau and his descendants. Paul describes the unconditioned nature of this election in even broader terms in verse 16, where he states that "it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." This statement may be taken to rule out any additional differentiating factors arising from the exercise of human will, such as faith or the absence

thereof. Indeed, the election of Jacob and his physical descendants was accomplished prior to and apart from any consideration of faith on either Jacob or Esau's part.

Unconditioned Election to Ultimate Salvation?

With these observations in mind, we are now in a position to answer the paramount theological question of whether the examples adduced by Paul in Romans 9:7-13 represent or support the concept of an unconditioned, individual election to ultimate salvation of the sort envisioned by Calvinists. To answer this question we must address three subsidiary questions. First, we must ask *who are the objects* of the election(s) described in these verses? Then we must ask *on what* (if anything) *is the election conditioned?* Finally, we must ask *to what end* is the election? (e.g., Is the elect person's ultimate salvation in view as the end of the election, or is some other end in view?) I will address these questions in turn.

In answer to the first question (i.e., *who are the objects* of the election?), the immediate objects of the election in the examples of 9:7-13 are Isaac and Israel (Jacob), though because this election is based on physical lineage according to God's promise (i.e., type #2 lineage above), it extends so as to encompass all of the physical descendants of Israel (though not all of the physical descendants of Abraham; see the discussion above). The election in view here contrasts in this regard to the election discussed by Paul in chapter four of Romans and alluded to in 9:6b, which is based on spiritual descent by faith of the same sort as Abraham's (type #1 lineage above). In the latter case, the objects of election are all and only those Jews and Gentiles who have the same faith as Abraham (cf. 4:12; 11:20, 23).

In answer to the second question above (i.e., *on what is the election conditioned?*), the election of Isaac and Jacob was said to be "not because of works, but *because of Him who calls*" (9:11). Looking ahead to verse 16, we saw that this same election "does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, *but on God who has mercy.*" The upshot of these assertions is that the type of election bestowed on Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's physical descendants (i.e., type #2 lineage above) was not based on any volitional factors on their part that might have obligated God to treat them differently than those who were not elected. Instead, God's discrimination between Jacob and Esau and their descendants was ultimately *unconstrained by any factors external to God's own free will to extend mercy.* This stands in contrast to the election based on Abraham's spiritual faith-lineage, which, though likewise entirely of grace, yet proceeds according to God's self-imposed binding decree to *save all and only those who believe* (John 3:15-18, 36, 6:40, 47, 11:25-26, 20:31; Acts 16:31; 1 Corinthians 1:21; cf. Arminius' formulation of

the second divine decree, "Public Disputations," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Disp. XV, 2, p. 226; "Certain Articles," *ibid.*, Art. XIV, p. 719). Election to salvation is therefore conditioned directly upon the faith of the recipients of that election, who contrast in this regard with the unbelievers not so elected. As Paul stated in chapter four, Abraham was appointed "the father of *all who believe . . . who also follow in the steps of the faith* of our father Abraham" (4:11-12). The promise to Abraham (on which the spiritual lineage of his faith-heirs is based) was "through the righteousness of *faith*" and is "*by faith*" (4:13, 16). Again, in chapter eleven Paul says of his unbelieving Jewish contemporaries that "they were broken off [i.e., excluded from participation in the new covenant of salvation centered in Christ] *for their unbelief*," whereas Paul says to the Roman Christians that they "stand" in this same new covenant "*by [their] faith*" (11:20). As I will discuss at more length below, this conditional election was not static, however, but dynamic, for Paul goes on to say in 11:23 that these same Jewish unbelievers who are currently nonelect (in the sense of election based on the #1 type faith-lineage of Abraham; cf. 11:7 and discussion below) can actually become elect and be grafted back into Christ and enjoy participation in his covenant, "*if they do not continue in their unbelief*." Paul could not have stated it more clearly: Election to participation in the spiritual lineage of Abraham is conditioned on faith, unlike election based on physical descent from Jacob (Israel), which is conditioned on nothing outside of God's own free will to extend mercy.⁷

Finally, we must ask *to what end* was the election of Isaac and Jacob (and their physical descendants)? In particular, was their ultimate salvation in view as the end of the election, or was some other end in view? We have already seen above that the election of Isaac and Jacob established the type #2 lineage listed above, namely the nation of Israel comprising all of those physically descended from Jacob (Israel). Paul refers to those of this lineage in 9:3-4 as "my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites," and provides a succinct description of the results of their election through Isaac and Jacob: ". . . to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh" (9:5-6). We have also seen that Paul noted earlier in 3:1-2 that the Jews had the distinct "advantage" of having been "entrusted with the oracles of God." In short, the physical descendants of Israel were chosen by God to mediate the revelation of God's verbal Word to humanity as well as to superintend the other external manifestations of God's presence among them in the sight of the nations, so as to prepare the way for Christ the Incarnate Word to come into the world. In this way, the physical Israelites were granted a privileged access to the truths of God as communicated through the covenants, the Law, the temple services, the promises, and Christ

himself.

Though this election clearly enhanced the opportunities available for any given individual Israelite to enter into a saving covenant relationship with God, the election did *not* in itself guarantee the salvation of individual Jews. The Bible is clear that each Jewish adult needed to enter personally into a saving covenant relationship with God by way of faith, loyalty, and resulting obedience to God. There was no guarantee of such participation in the covenant merely on the basis of election according to the type #2 lineage described above and referred to in Romans 9:7-13. Indeed, the Old Testament is replete with examples of physical descendants of Israel who clearly failed to participate by faith in covenant relationship with God and who thus bore no evidence of having attained to spiritual salvation. The book of Malachi is instructive in this regard. Though, as noted earlier, God reaffirmed to the Israelites of Malachi's day the irrevocable nature of his promises to the patriarchs (Malachi 1:2; 3:6), at the same time God made it clear that the Israelites' spiritual salvation was contingent upon personal repentance and faith. Only "those who fear[ed] the Lord and who esteem[ed] his name" (3:16) were considered by God to belong to him as his "own possession" (3:17), and none of the Israelites who persisted in wickedness would be spared in the coming day of judgment (Malachi 3:17-4:3; see also 2:2-3, 9, 12; 3:5, 9; 4:6).

Moreover, it is important to recall that the possibility of spiritual salvation was not limited to the physical descendants of Israel, even in Old Testament times. The Mosaic Law made accommodations for any Gentile who so desired to freely enter into a saving covenant relationship with God by voluntarily placing himself under the conditions of the covenant (in essence, to voluntarily "become a Jew;" cf. Exodus 12:48; Leviticus 19:33-34; Joshua 8:33; Ruth 1:16; Isaiah 14:1; 56:3, 6-8). Thus, the election of Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants spoken of in Romans 9:7-13 did not have the ultimate personal salvation of the elect in view as its end or guarantee such salvation to them, nor did it preclude the ultimate salvation of the nonelect (i.e., Ishmael, Esau, or any other Gentile). Instead, this election based on type #2 physical lineage resulted only in a *privileged access to the saving truths of God* and an *increased opportunity to interact with and embrace those saving truths by faith* (i.e., an increased opportunity to choose to participate by faith in the type #1 spiritual lineage). This was indeed the status of the Jews in Paul's day, among whom even those who were at that time mired in unbelief still had available to them the opportunity to embrace faith in Christ and be "grafted back in again" to the "tree" representing God's people (11:23).

Two Forms of Preventive Grace

So then, what we find is that the unconditioned form of election referred to by Paul in Romans 9:7-13 and embodied in God's choice of Isaac, Jacob, and (by extension) their descendants was not an election guaranteeing their ultimate salvation at all, but rather an election by which God granted them an *enhanced opportunity* to exercise saving faith. We might say that God's election of the physical descendants of Israel constituted a commitment by God to *aggressively pursue* a saving relationship with them by giving them heightened access to his truth. Notice that this characterization of God's election of the Jewish people closely parallels the traditional concept of *prevenient grace* (see the section "Definitions" above), which is that form of resistible grace extended by God to a person by which that person may be drawn to faith and repentance, *if* the person responds cooperatively and willingly to the grace so extended. Without such prevenient grace, it is impossible for the natural, unregenerate person to exercise an authentic faith decision toward God (John 6:44). By means of prevenient grace, the unbeliever is both granted access to the truths of the gospel and enabled to freely respond in faith to those truths if he so desires. The grace extended to the physical descendants of Israel (type #2 lineage above) can be considered one form of prevenient grace in that it constituted an opportunity granted to the Jewish people to access and interact with God's saving truths in such a way that could potentially lead to their salvation.

Whereas the form of prevenient grace extended to Isaac and Jacob was discriminatory (in that God discriminated between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau, as recipients of this prevenient grace), Paul speaks in Romans chapters one and two of another more basic form of prevenient grace that is clearly *not* discriminatory at all but rather is universally dispensed. In 1:19-20 Paul says that God has "made evident" to all men "His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature" through the world that he has made. In 1:21 Paul says that by means of this revelation all people "knew God," in 1:25 he says that they had access to "the truth of God," and in 1:32 he says that they "know the ordinance of God." In 2:15 Paul says that even the Gentiles have "the work of the Law written in their hearts." This self-revelation of God to all humanity through nature and through the human conscience is sufficient to leave people "without excuse" for their sin (1:20; 2:1). Not only this, but Paul's statement in 1:21 strongly suggests that the divine dispensing of what we might call *universal prevenient grace* provides all people with a basic ability to exercise faith if they so choose.⁸ Paul says, "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (1:21). The activities mentioned here of *honoring God* and *giving thanks* both presuppose the exercise of faith. Paul's mention of these activities in this context implies that all people are supplied with a *real capacity* to respond to God's

self-revelation in these ways (i.e., to respond in faith), but that they fail to do so, choosing rather to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (vs. 18). As a result, their already “foolish heart” is further “darkened” (vs. 21) and they bring themselves under God’s just condemnation and wrath (vs. 18a).

This interpretation of universal prevenient grace as enabling a true faith response for all people is further confirmed by Paul’s wording in Romans 2:4, where he points out the hypocrisy of those who commit the same sins of which they judge others. Paul chides them, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (2:4). God’s *kindness*, *forbearance*, and *patience* mentioned here are all expressions of his universal prevenient grace, by which he delays the full manifestation of his wrath upon sinners in order to give them additional opportunity to repent (cf. 2 Peter 3:9). Importantly, Paul says that such kindness on God’s part is meant to “lead” such sinners “to repentance.” This expression “leads . . . to repentance” in verse 2:4b suggests both that such repentance on the part of any person is genuinely possible--not just in theory, but *actually*, just as the expressions of faith mentioned in 1:21 are truly possible for any person--and that this repentance is made possible only under the influence (“leading”) of God’s kindness, that is, by the enabling of God’s prevenient grace.

Note that I am *not* saying here that people have a natural capacity to come to faith and repentance without divine assistance (the Pelagian error). Instead, I am concluding from Romans chapters one and two that God universally extends a basic form of prevenient grace (through the revelation of creation, the human conscience, and the delay of God’s wrath upon sin) by which all people come to intuitively understand in some significant measure the glory and moral perfection of God and are given both the opportunity and ability to freely respond to that revelation in faith and repentance, if they so choose. People do not so choose, however, but prefer rather to freely follow the leanings of their “foolish” hearts, which through the inherited effects of Adam’s sin have been rendered prone to believe the deceptions of sin (see my essay “Thoughts on Original Sin”). As a result, all people bring God’s righteous condemnation upon themselves, not because God has unilaterally predetermined that they would sin (one of the Calvinist errors), but because they have through the exercise of authentic, contra-causal free will (see my essays “The Wills of God” and “Philosophical Reflections on Free Will”) suppressed the knowledge of God gained via his universal prevenient grace.

The existence of universal prevenient grace of this sort as described by Paul in chapters one and two of Romans helps explain how God can be just to dispense a discriminatory prevenient grace

of the kind described in Romans 9:7-13 (what I will for the sake of discussion call *particular prevenient grace*, as distinguished from universal prevenient grace). Though Isaac and Jacob were indeed elected to a position of privileged access to God's truth as members of the physical lineage of promise, it is not as though Ishmael, Esau, and the other multitude of Gentiles on earth were abandoned to face life without any offer of prevenient grace from God. At the very least, they would all have been recipients of the same universal prevenient grace described by Paul in Romans chapters one and two. This alone is sufficient to render them by the exercise of their own free will "without excuse," and this divine dispensing of universal prevenient grace alone is sufficient to prove the truth of the assertion that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4; also Ezekiel 18:23, Isaiah 45:22, 2 Peter 3:9).⁹ God has expressed this desire that all be saved not only by granting every person an intuition of God and his righteous Law, but also by granting every person the ability to freely respond to this intuition by faith and repentance. God's desire in this matter flows from his own moral nature as a truly good being who desires what is good for his creatures. There is no sense, however, in which God's moral nature obligates him to grant any unbeliever more than this; indeed, God was not even obligated to extend this universal prevenient grace in the first place (i.e., it is truly "grace"), except as he was constrained to do so by his own moral nature that causes him to truly will the salvation of all those created in his image. Consequently, in providing additional, particular prevenient grace of the sort described by Paul in 9:7-11, God is "going the second mile," so to speak, and can dispense such grace unequally without violation of any moral obligations on God's part, either to himself or to his creatures.

God's Sovereign Dispensing of Particular Prevenient Grace

Expanding on the above conclusions, the broader theological lesson to be drawn from Romans 9:7-13 is that *God may sovereignly discriminate in his dispensing of particular prevenient grace*. Just as God unilaterally elected Isaac and Jacob but not Ishmael and Esau to be recipients of the unique opportunities that came with being members of the promised Jewish lineage, so God maintains an absolute, sovereign right to either extend or withhold additional opportunities (beyond those afforded by universal prevenient grace) for any unbeliever to access and discern sufficient truth to be able to freely repent and enter into a saving relationship with God through faith in Christ. God's own will and pleasure is thus the sole determinant of *if* and *when* God extends such additional grace to any person who has suppressed (or in Isaac and Jacob's case, will later suppress) God's offer of universal prevenient grace.¹⁰

It must be reiterated that this unconditioned, discriminating dispensing of particular prevenient

grace contrasts sharply with the divine distribution of *saving* grace, which as I argued earlier (based on Paul's discussion in Romans chapters four and eleven) is dispensed conditionally, contingent upon the faith of the recipient. Whereas the particular prevenient grace in view in 9:7-13 is not distributed under any obligation or binding conditions on God's part, saving grace is distributed according to God's binding decree that *all believers will be saved*. Thus, unlike the unbelievers who are the recipients of prevenient grace, believers (i.e., those "of the faith of Abraham") do have a "claim" on God, so to speak--not by any natural, inherent right, and certainly not on the basis of self-merit--but instead on the basis of God's own gracious, binding decree to save all who have faith in Christ. God cannot deal discriminately with believers (i.e., he can never withhold saving grace from any believer), for his faithfulness to his own decree constrains his actions in this regard.¹¹

We might still ask *why* particular prevenient grace should be distributed on an unconditioned basis (i.e., without regard to differentiating factors within the potential recipients of that grace) but saving grace be distributed contingent on the free faith of the recipient. The answer to this question rests on the differing relations of prevenient grace and saving grace to human free will. Prevenient grace (whether universal or particular) by definition *precedes* the exercise of free will on a person's part because it is the very thing that enables the functioning of that free will in regard to salvation. This is why particular prevenient grace is necessarily dispensed prior to faith, for faith is the expression of human free will leading to salvation. At the point of God's dispensing of prevenient grace to an unbeliever, it still remains to be seen how the unbeliever will choose, whether to respond favorably or negatively to God's offer of salvation. Consequently, there is no sense in which the divine dispensing of prevenient grace could ever override or violate the integrity of human free will, for until prevenient grace presenting an opportunity for salvation has been received by a person, he will not have been *able* to exercise significant free will in regard to salvation. Because God's dispensing of prevenient grace is not contingent on any outcome of the exercise of a person's free will, particular prevenient grace may therefore be dispensed without constraint to whomever God chooses, prior to and apart from the exercise of faith, without this compromising human free will. Saving grace, in contrast, is dispensed by God only *after* the exercise of human free will in regard to faith for salvation; saving grace is thus God's response to a person's free choice of faith and repentance. As such, saving grace must be distributed contingently only to those who freely desire to receive it. Otherwise, if God dispensed saving grace through an act of compulsion, or if he dispensed saving grace even to one who freely rejected it, the integrity of that person's free will would be violated.

An important consequence of the above observations is that saving grace and particular

prevenient grace are distributed to different populations. Saving grace is granted to *all believers* (and only to believers), contingent on their faith. Particular prevenient grace (i.e., that having potential salvation in view) is dispensed to *some unbelievers* according to the discriminating pleasure of God, prior to the exercise of any faith on the recipients' part. One might object that by specifying unbelievers (i.e., those who have not yet exercised faith) as the recipients of particular prevenient grace, I am in fact making the distribution of particular prevenient grace sensitive to and contingent upon a volitional factor within these recipients (i.e., their lack of faith), in contradiction to Romans 9:16 ("it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs . . ."). This objection will not stand, however. Romans 9:16 must be interpreted in the context of 9:11 and the surrounding text. These verses address only the question of what was God's basis for differentiating *between* Jacob and Esau; it does not address the nature of the population of which *both* Jacob and Esau were members.¹² In regard to the latter issue, neither Jacob nor Esau had exercised faith in God when God elected to grant the one brother but not the other particular prevenient grace. In this sense both brothers can at that point be grouped with unbelievers, in which state God was under no self-imposed binding obligation to dispense grace to either of them.

Corporate and Individual Perspectives on Election

The notions of unconditioned and conditioned election discussed above address the criteria for God's choice of to whom he will dispense his grace. These notions bear directly on the question of whether election is seen as an absolute, irrevocable and unchanging decree or state, or instead in some sense as dynamic in nature. Election is often understood (especially by those heavily influenced by Calvinist thought) strictly in absolute terms such that an individual is, always has been, and always will be chosen by God to ultimately belong to one particular group (e.g., the redeemed or else the reprobate). The situation in reality is more complicated than this, however. While it is true that there is an absolute sense of election that is "irrevocable" and cannot be changed (Romans 11:29), this sense of election appears to be always applied in Scripture at the *corporate* rather than individual level, whether the corporate body in question is Jacob and his physical descendants considered as a whole (i.e., physical Israel; Romans 9:3-5; 11:1-2), or Christ and his Body comprised of all those in spiritual union with him through faith (i.e., the Church, or spiritual Israel; Romans 9:6b; Ephesians 1:4-6, 22-23; John 15; 1 Peter 2:9-10). Thus, it is an unchangeable, absolute decree that all those physically descended from Jacob participate in the election of physical Israel (and are "beloved for the sake of the fathers," despite the unbelief of the majority; Romans 11:28). Similarly, it is an unchangeable, absolute decree that all those who are "of the faith of Abraham" (Romans 4:16) are in union with Christ, and in

that union enjoy “every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1:3) from God, including justification and all that comes with the inheritance belonging to the children of God (see Ephesians 1:3-14). Because this elective decree precedes and does not depend for its legitimacy upon the exercise of faith by any particular individual, the decree itself is properly conceived of as having been unilaterally established by God.

In addition to election considered corporately as above, there is a secondary sense in which election can be applied at the individual level.¹³ However, in this case whether the election is determinate or contingent will depend on the nature of the lineage established by that election. Because the election of the descendants of Jacob is based on a physical lineage that advances without the prior consent of those within its scope (i.e., parents do not obtain a child’s consent before conceiving it), such election is determinate for each individual descendant. That is, each descendant necessarily participates in the physical lineage, and under no condition can such descent be altered in respect to any given descendant. In contrast, the election of believers to union with Christ establishes a *spiritual* lineage that advances only with the consent of those who participate in it. While the decree establishing beforehand such election is itself unconditioned because it precedes the free exercise of faith in Christ by any individual, individual participation in the election is contingent upon the exercise of such faith. Therefore, one can be considered elect to salvation *as an individual* only in a dynamic sense, with reference to one’s current union with Christ *through faith*. It is for this reason that Paul can speak of branches who were once members of the spiritual “tree” of Israel being “broken off” for lack of faith (Romans 11:20; cf. John 15:6), or of other branches once broken off being “grafted in again” due to renewed faith (Romans 11:23). The status of these individuals can change from “nonelect” to “elect,” or vice versa, precisely because election according to a spiritual lineage when applied to individuals is contingent on the free exercise of faith.

Similarly, in 2 Peter 1:10-11, after having exhorted his readers to “make every effort” (vs. 5, NIV) to acquire the qualities of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and godliness (vss. 5-7), Peter charged the believers to “be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For *if you do these things* [i.e., if you pursue the above-mentioned qualities], you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (NIV). Clearly Peter viewed these believers’ election to salvation as contingent upon their willingness to persevere in a life-changing faith leading to ever-increasing godliness, and clearly Peter viewed this continuance in faith and godliness as being contingent upon the exercise of the believers’ own free wills. Either they would choose to “make every effort” to achieve these qualities and persevere in faith, or else they would fail to do so and thus become

“nearsighted and blind” (vs. 9) and “fall” from their current standing (vs. 10). The latter choice would effectively negate their election (considered individually) and cast doubt on their future entrance into the kingdom of Christ.

Section Summary (Romans 9:6-13)

The question guiding Romans 9:6-13 is whether God's promises to the patriarchs have failed, in view of the fact that the majority of the patriarchs' physical descendants in Paul's day did not believe in Christ. In this passage Paul presented a twofold argument that God has not failed to keep his promises to the patriarchs, an argument based on the two distinct perspectives from which God's promise may be viewed. First, the promise of God may be considered as it is *an assurance to be believed*. It is this sense of the promise that is in view in Romans chapter four, where Paul argued that spiritual descent from Abraham is contingent upon faith in God's promises. Paul reiterated this point in 9:6b, that election to salvation (participation in spiritual Israel) is not based on physical descent from Jacob (Israel). It is therefore a false assumption that mere physical descent from the patriarchs should have guaranteed the Jews a saving relationship to God. In this sense of election (i.e., election to salvation contingent on faith), not all of physical Israel is to be considered elect, but only those members of physical Israel who are of the faith of Abraham. God thus remains faithful to his promise expressed by this election, to save all who believe.

Second, as Paul argued in 9:7-13, there is a separate sense of election in which all the physical descendants of Israel (Jacob) *are* to be considered elect, namely, as “children of promise” falling within the divinely recognized physical lineage delineating the Jews from the Gentiles. This lineage gains its validity not by mere blind physical descent from Abraham but by God's promise expressing his *unconditioned choice* of Isaac over Ishmael, of Jacob over Esau. Given that this election of the physical descendants of Israel is irrevocable and not contingent upon the faith of those within its scope, it therefore remains in force despite the unbelief of the majority. God is thus again seen to be faithful to his promise, and will continue to pursue the salvation of the Jews until the time when “all Israel will be saved” (11:32).

In terms of the theological implications of Paul's remarks in Romans 9:6-13, I argued that one cannot generalize from the Isaac and Jacob examples to conclude that God's election to salvation is likewise unconditioned in nature. Not only would such a conclusion fail to appreciate the distinction between the two distinct senses of the promise dealt with by Paul (hence, the two forms of lineage according to promise, and the two associated forms of election),

it would also contradict the clear teaching of Romans chapters four and eleven that election to salvation is conditioned on faith. The election of Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants involved only an election to greater opportunities to access and understand God's truth. This election in no way determined their ultimate salvation or lack thereof, just as the nonelection of Ishmael, Esau, and all other Gentiles in no way determined that they would be ultimately reprobate. I argued that the election of Isaac and Jacob is properly viewed as the dispensing of one form of prevenient grace rather than saving grace. Specifically, it is a form of what I have termed *particular prevenient grace*, in distinction from the *universal prevenient grace* discussed by Paul in Romans chapters one and two. Whereas universal prevenient grace is extended by God to all people as an expression of God's desire that all be saved, the additional opportunities to interact with God's truth afforded by particular prevenient grace may be extended discriminately by God to one person or group but not to another, according to the good pleasure and purposes of God. This further contrasts to *saving grace*, which is dispensed contingently under constraint of God's binding decree that all and only those who believe will be saved.

In the final subsection I discussed in what ways God's election may be viewed from either a corporate or individual perspective. Corporately, both physical Israel (i.e., the physical descendants of Jacob) and spiritual Israel (i.e., those of the faith of Abraham) were elected by God on an absolute and irrevocable basis from all eternity. How this absolute corporate election plays out at the individual level depends, however, upon the nature of the lineage established by the election in question. In the case of physical Israel, the physical descent established by election advances without prior consent of the participating individuals and is therefore determinate for each individual. In the case of spiritual Israel, descent advances on the basis of the free exercise of faith. Consequently, the election to salvation of any given individual is dynamic in nature and contingent upon the faith of that individual.

Analysis of Romans 9:14-18

No Injustice With God

Having presented Isaac and Jacob in 9:7-13 as recipients of an unconditioned election to privileged access to God's truth (i.e., recipients of particular prevenient grace), Paul now addresses the objection that such examples naturally raise: "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?" (9:14; cf. 3:5, 7, for similarly worded objections). That is, can God rightly grant such prevenient grace to Jacob but not to his twin brother without consideration of differentiating factors within the two? Isn't such seemingly arbitrary discrimination on God's part unfair? Paul emphatically denies this conclusion, quoting as justification for his position God's words to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (cf. Exodus 33:19).

The "mercy" and "compassion" here should not be construed as the grace of salvation itself (i.e., as saving grace), for neither the immediate context nor the context in Exodus 33 will support such an interpretation. This first point I have argued at length above, namely, that the favor shown to Isaac and Jacob (which the terms "mercy" and "compassion" in 9:15 clearly have in view, taken in the context of 9:7-13) constituted only an enhanced opportunity to access and interact with the truths of God, not a guarantee of ultimate salvation. Similarly, in Exodus 33 God made this statement concerning the expression of his mercy and compassion in direct response to Moses' request that God show Moses his glory (Exodus 33:18). God granted Moses his request, assuring Moses that he would make his goodness "pass before" Moses and "proclaim the name of the Lord" to him (33:19a). It is precisely this self-revelation of God to Moses that constitutes the immediate reference of the "mercy" and "compassion" of which God speaks in Exodus 33:19b (quoted by Paul in Romans 9:15). That is, God was under no obligation to grant Moses' request to see his glory, but God graciously obliged Moses because it was God's own pleasure to do so. God thus granted Moses a unique opportunity to see and understand deeper truths of God's nature. This self-revelation of God was not an election guaranteeing Moses' ultimate salvation; instead, it closely parallels what I have described above as particular prevenient grace, by which man is granted greater access to the divine revelation of saving truth. The context of both Exodus 33 and Romans chapter nine, then, mandates that we understand the "mercy" and "compassion" said in Romans 9:15 to be unilaterally dispensed by God to be forms of particular prevenient grace, not saving grace.

Paul's reason, then, for denying any unfairness in God's discrimination between Isaac and

Ishmael, as well as between Jacob and Esau, is that God is free to show mercy and compassion (i.e., extend particular prevenient grace) to whomever he pleases without regard for any differentiating volitional factors that might lie within the potential recipients of that grace. In the terms introduced earlier, this is as much as to say that God is under no binding obligation in his dispensing of particular prevenient grace. In regard to the dispensing of such grace (in contrast to the dispensing of saving grace), Paul can without hesitation assert that “it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (9:16).

Pharoah and Hardening

Having asserted that God is not unfair to discriminate in this way in the dispensing of particular prevenient grace, Paul then in 9:17 presents Pharaoh as another example from the Old Testament (intentionally juxtaposed to the example of Moses in 9:15) to illustrate and expand upon his point. The case of Pharaoh introduces a new concept that Paul is eager to discuss because it will help to fill an important gap in his explanation for why the majority of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries were intransigent in their unbelief. This new concept is the notion of *hardening*. Hardening is a counterpart to one aspect of God’s dispensing of prevenient grace, namely, that aspect of prevenient grace by which a person is enabled to perceive and freely respond to spiritual truth. Hardening occurs whenever God diminishes or withdraws from a person this ability to discern spiritual truth (Romans 11:8-10), thereby reducing or eliminating that person’s receptivity to the truth and confirming his prior free suppression of such truth (referred to in Romans 1:18). God may justly harden an individual or group in this way on the same basis that he could justly choose Jacob but reject Esau, namely, because God is sovereign over the dispensing of particular prevenient grace. Just as God may “show mercy” to whomever he desires by extending additional opportunities to access, understand, and respond to God’s saving truth beyond the basic opportunity provided by means of universal prevenient grace, so God may also do the opposite and withdraw such opportunities, in this way confirming a person’s prior self-determination to resist God and suppress the divine revelation of truth.

It is important to understand that though God exercises a divine prerogative when choosing to harden someone, this does not mean that God acts arbitrarily or without reference to the sins committed by the one hardened. Hardening is always presented in Scripture as a *divine response to human sin*. As Arminius observed, “In Isaiah [chapter] six, hardening and blinding is denounced *against those who have refused to obey God*, as is evident from [Isaiah] chapter five. With this the Apostle Paul plainly agrees, in Acts 28:26, 27, citing that passage against those of the Jews who believed not” (“Examination of Perkin’s Pamphlet,” *The Works of James*

Arminius, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, p. 312, emphasis added). Among other passages cited by Arminius in support of this point is Psalm 81:11-12: "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." The same causal relationship is plainly seen in Romans chapter one, where in reference to the unrighteous (cf. 1:18) Paul says three times that God "gave them over" *because of* their sin:

"they did not honor Him as God . . . *Therefore* God gave them over . . . (1:21, 24)

"they exchanged the truth of God for a lie . . . *For this reason* God gave them over . . . (1:25-26)

"*Just as* they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over . . ." (1:28)

Hardening, then, should never be viewed as a divine act that is somehow abstracted away from human sin, as though God would choose to harden individuals without reference to their status as sinners. Though God is under no compulsion when exercising his right to harden an individual, when God does so harden it is always a direct response to the intransigence of the human heart.^{14, 15}

It must further be emphasized that the objects of hardening are always *unbelievers*, those who have already rejected God's offer of universal prevenient grace. God *never* hardens believers, for to do so would mean violating his own eternal decree to save all who believe. Moreover, God's faithfulness to the covenant of grace binds him to support with "every spiritual blessing" (Ephesians 1:3) those who are already members of the covenant through a living faith. (This is not to say that believers may not harden *themselves* and thereby endanger their salvation through a willful commission of sin and rejection of faith; cf. Hebrews 3:12-4:1 and my essay "Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith.") Pharaoh himself is a good example of one whom as an unbeliever God could rightfully harden. The Exodus account presents Pharaoh as committed in his belief that the gods of Egypt were superior to the God of Israel (Exodus 5:2). From the first of his encounters with Moses, Pharaoh was steadfast in his resistance to the truth of God being revealed through Moses, even hardening his own heart in response (Exodus 8:15, 32). This intransigence was merely the natural outflow of Pharaoh's prior lifelong rejection of God's universal prevenient grace toward him. Pharaoh was a sinner steeped in unbelief long before Moses appeared to confront him with the claims of the living God. God was thus fully within his moral rights to harden Pharaoh, the unbeliever, and to do so for his own evangelical purposes, namely, the magnification of his own glory among the nations (Exodus 9:16; Romans 9:17).

Paul can thus rightly conclude that God “has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” (9:18). The same population from which God may unilaterally select the objects of particular prevenient grace (i.e., mankind prior to any free exercise of faith, comprising all those who have or will receive his universal prevenient grace and suppress the truth thereby revealed) is the same population from which God may unilaterally select those whom he will harden. The recipients of his grace, on the one hand, and of his hardening, on the other hand, are all equally undeserving of any good from God and all equally merit condemnation for their willful rejection of the truth.¹⁶

It must also be emphasized that the divine hardening of unbelievers as discussed by Paul in Romans is not in direct reference to their *ultimate* salvation or lack thereof, but only in reference to their *present access to saving truth*. That is, the fact that an unbeliever is currently under the hardening influence of God does not necessitate that the unbeliever in question will permanently remain under the hardening influence of God, nor does it necessarily rule out the possibility of that person’s eventual salvation. This point is made clearer in Romans chapter eleven, where Paul analyzes in more detail the condition of his unbelieving Jewish contemporaries. In 11:7 and 11:25 Paul speaks of the present “hardening” by God of the majority of the Jews, a hardening that God used for the purpose of allowing the gospel to be brought to the Gentiles (11:11-12), which in turn was designed by God to make the unbelieving Jews “jealous” (11:11, 14), thereby leading to the eventual salvation of “all Israel” (11:26). The key point here in regard to our present discussion of hardening is that there is restoration for Israel *after hardening*. That this possibility of salvation for those once hardened extends to individuals and not merely to Israel as an entity is made clear in 11:23, where Paul, speaking of the broken off “branches” of Israel (i.e., the hardened individuals, in contrast to the tree of Israel considered as a whole; cf. vss. 17, 19, 21), says of these hardened individuals, “if they do not continue in their unbelief, [they] will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again.” It is clear from this example that the divine hardening of unbelievers cannot necessarily entail the final reprobation of those hardened; otherwise, it would have been out of the question that the same branches once “broken off” could ever be “grafted in again.” Instead, it must be the case that the divine hardening of unbelievers (including the majority of Jews of Paul’s day) makes necessary reference only to the hardened person’s current diminished accessibility and responsiveness to the saving truths of God.

The above allusion to the hardening of the majority of physical Israel in Romans chapter eleven raises an important question. If God’s corporate election of the physical descendants of Israel

constituted a form of particular prevenient grace by which they were entrusted with the saving truths of God, then how could God both extend this particular prevenient grace to them and yet at the same time harden them? Doesn't this yield a contradiction, given that hardening is a withdrawal of prevenient grace? In reply, there is no contradiction here once we recognize that hardening constitutes a withdrawal of only one aspect of prevenient grace, namely, the ability to perceive and respond to spiritual truth. Though God hardened the majority of physical Israel in this sense, this did not negate the fact that they remained privileged recipients of the "oracles of God" (3:2). That is, they continued to have privileged access to the truths of God, even though their spiritual receptivity to those truths had been diminished once they were hardened. In this sense they continued to be recipients of God's particular prevenient grace, in accordance with their corporate election to such status through God's promises to the patriarchs. Moreover, God's dispensing of particular prevenient grace to the physical descendants of Israel seems to have been constituted in large part by God's *commitment to pursue the salvation of the Jews*, both by maintaining a "remnant" of believers among them (11:2-5) and by working to see the eventual salvation of all physical Israel (11:26). Far from representing an abandonment of this commitment on God's part, the hardening of the majority of physical Israel is presented by Paul as one necessary step in the process of bringing about this eventual salvation of all Israel (9:22-24; 11:11-32). I will discuss this important point in more detail below.

Section Summary (Romans 9:14-18) and Summary to This Point

We have seen that in Romans 9:14-18, Paul responds to an objection naturally raised by the examples in the preceding section, namely, how God can be fair to discriminate in his dispensing of particular prevenient grace without making reference to volitional factors within the recipients that might differentiate between them. Paul's response to this objection is twofold. First, he appeals to God's words to Moses to the effect that God may show mercy and compassion to whomever he wishes. I have argued that within the context this must be taken as referring to the dispensing of particular prevenient grace, which as we saw earlier with the example of Jacob, may be dispensed at God's discretion. Second, Paul presents the example of Pharaoh, not as a recipient of particular prevenient grace, but as an object of its counterpart, hardening. As with the dispensing of particular prevenient grace, God is fully within his rights to harden any unbeliever whom he wishes, for all have suppressed the revelation of his general prevenient grace and are thus equally undeserving of any further grace or mercy from God. I emphasized that God may not harden believers, however, for he has bound himself to grant them saving grace and support them with every spiritual blessing. I also argued that the hardening spoken of in Romans 9:17-18 has no direct reference to the hardened person's ultimate salvation, but

only to his present sensitivity and receptivity to the saving truths of God. Such hardening can be withdrawn by God at a later date, as demonstrated in reference to the Jews in Romans chapter eleven.

It is important to keep in mind how this section in 9:14-18 fits into the larger flow of Paul's argument in Romans chapter nine. The chapter began by questioning in what sense God can be said to have remained faithful to his election of the Jewish people through the promises made to the patriarchs, given that the majority of Jews have not accepted the truth of the gospel of Christ. Paul has defended God's faithfulness to his promises by arguing that (a) the promise of participation in spiritual Israel was only made to those who are of faith (vs. 6b; with reference to chapter four), and (b) the promise of participation in physical Israel was made as a unilateral choice of God that still holds true for all the physical descendants of Jacob, despite the unbelief of the majority (vss. 7-13). In working out the second of these points Paul has focused on how this election of the physical descendants of Israel displays God's right to discriminate among equally unworthy recipients of his particular prevenient grace. In verses 17-18 Paul extended the discussion of God's sovereign right to act in this way to the notion of hardening. Like the dispensing of particular prevenient grace to the physical descendants of Israel, the hardening of unbelievers occurs solely at God's discretion. As verse 18 closes, Paul's larger reason for bringing up this subject of hardening is not yet evident, though I have touched briefly on it above. This larger reason, which will become explicit beginning in verse 22 and will be a major topic of chapter eleven, provides Paul with an additional reason to conclude that the present unbelief of the majority of Jews does not constitute a rejection of God's prior election of them. Specifically, Paul will argue that their present unbelief is in part a result of God's hardening of them, and that this temporary hardening, rather than constituting a negation of God's promises to the patriarchs, is actually a key component in God's broader plan to accomplish the fulfillment of those promises and eventually bring all of physical Israel to faith in Christ.

Aside to Chapter 11

Before moving directly into an exegesis of Romans 9:19-29, it will be helpful to first jump ahead and consider more carefully Paul's basic arguments regarding hardening as it relates to the fulfillment of God's intentions for the Jewish people in chapter eleven, to which I have already alluded at several points above. This is necessary because Paul's arguments in 9:19-29 must be seen in light of chapter eleven to be properly understood.

After a discussion of the nature of saving faith in chapter ten, Paul returns in 11:1-5 to a straightforward consideration of the question whether God has rejected his former election of the Jewish people through the patriarchs, who by and large have rejected faith in Christ (i.e., rejected participation in the spiritual type #1 lineage discussed earlier) in favor of an attempted self-made righteousness based on the Law (9:31-32). As discussed earlier, this corporate election of the Jews may be considered a form of particular prevenient grace by which God granted the Jewish people special, privileged access to his Law and his saving truth. The question, then, is whether this privileged access somehow ended with the close of the Old Testament and the Jews' national rejection of Christ, or whether God in the New Testament era (and beyond) is still pursuing the Jewish people in a special way according to his divine plan. Paul clearly holds to the latter position, that God's election of the Jews is "irrevocable" (11:29) and that their election according to physical lineage from Jacob (the type #2 physical lineage according to promise) still stands. Thus, "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (11:2). Paul previously affirmed this continuing privileged access of the Jews to the gospel of Christ in Romans 1:16, where he said that the gospel of Jesus "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first* and also to the Greek." This priority of access to God's saving truths bestowed on the Jews was not only reflected in Jesus' ministry (Matthew 10:5-6, 15:24) but continued to form the focus of the early ministry of his apostles as well (Acts 1:8, 12; 2:5, 14, 22; 3:12, 25-26; 5:16; 6:7).

The focused dispensing of particular prevenient grace to the physical descendants of Israel in the New Testament era had a divinely intended result to which Paul alludes in Romans 11:5: It fostered the development of a "remnant [of believing Jews] according to God's gracious choice" (cf. 9:27-29). This can be seen in the astounding results attained by the preaching of the gospel in the early days of the church. In Acts 2:41 we are told that on the day of Pentecost "about three thousand souls" (2:41) were added to the Church from among the "devout men" of Jerusalem (2:5). Not long after, another "five thousand" were added (4:4). In Acts 5:14 we are told that "multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their [the Church's] number," and in 6:7 we learn that even "a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." Such were the results of God's aggressive dispensing of particular prevenient grace among the Jews of that time, by which a "remnant according to God's gracious choice" was established under the preaching of the gospel of Christ.

Paul elaborates on this development in Romans 11:7: "That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but *those who were chosen obtained it*, and the rest were hardened." At first glance this verse may seem to support the view that God unconditionally elected the members of

the one group to salvation, while hardening the rest (i.e., those not chosen) to ultimate reprobation. A closer examination of the wider passage reveals that this is not a tenable interpretation, however. It is important in this regard first to identify the "it" for which Israel is said to have sought in 11:7. A look back at 9:30-10:3 gives us the answer: Israel had been seeking *righteousness*, though the majority of the Jews had erroneously sought a righteousness according to works rather than grace, a righteousness of their own making instead of God's imputed righteousness (9:32, 10:3). So then, according to 11:7 it is only "those who were chosen" who obtained genuine righteousness of the latter variety. The question, then, is *on what basis were they chosen to obtain this righteousness?* Contrary to what is often assumed, Paul does *not* specify in this verse the basis for God's choice of them. Crucially, there is no suggestion in this passage itself that God's choice of them was unconditioned on any volitional factors within those chosen. We are told only the *result* not the cause of God's choice of them, this result being their salvation (the attaining of God's righteousness), in contrast to the result that followed for "the rest," namely, their hardening. The most that we know from this verse, then, is that the election here of a "remnant" in 11:5 had saving grace in view, in contrast to God's election of all physical Israel according to the type #2 lineage spoken of in 9:3-5, 11:1-2, and 11:28, which had the dispensing of particular prevenient grace in view.

We must look elsewhere to 4:11-16, 9:30-10:4, and especially to 11:20-23 to find out on what basis God chose this remnant of the Jews. The answer that emerges from these passages is that the remnant were chosen on the basis of their *faith*. In 11:20, 23, for example, Paul asserts that those Jews who are currently excluded from membership in the true Israel (cf. Romans 4:12, 9:6) are excluded because of their lack of faith, and their future participation is contingent upon their future exercise of faith. It is clear from Paul's remarks in this passage that election to a saving relationship with God is conditioned on one's faith.

Paul makes these statements in the midst of a broader discussion of the rationale behind God's hardening of the majority of the Jews. Paul's discussion of hardening in this passage is meant to complete his answer to the questions raised above about the status of the Jews (11:1), who are elect according to their physical descent from Israel. As noted above, God has not rejected his election of the Jewish people, but has established a remnant of believing Jews according to his gracious choice (9:27-29; 11:5, 7). This might seem to still leave unclear, however, the status of those Jews who do *not* believe. Have *they* and their prior election as physical descendants of Israel been rejected by God? No, Paul argues, the unbelieving physical descendants of Israel have *not been rejected*, instead they have been temporarily *hardened* (11:7, 25). Unlike an outright rejection, God's hardening of the unbelieving Jews is presented

by Paul to be one stage in a larger plan by which God seeks to ultimately draw the Jews to faith. Note that this hardening is not merely a self-induced condition on the part of these Jewish unbelievers (though hardening may be *accompanied* by the unbeliever's self-hardening, as it was in the case of Pharaoh). Rather, the hardening referred to in this passage is a condition that has been brought about or at the very least has been intensified by the direct action of God himself, as the Old Testament quotations in 11:8-10 make clear. This is fully in accordance with my earlier comments on the hardening of Pharaoh in Romans 9:14-18. Hardening is that counterpart to particular prevenient grace by which God reduces the sensitivity and receptivity of an unbeliever to spiritual truth. This hardening may justly occur at the complete discrepancy of God upon any unbeliever, for the accomplishment of God's own broader purposes (9:18).

Here in Romans chapter eleven Paul states a specific purpose behind God's hardening of those Jews who failed to turn in faith to Christ: God desired to use their unbelief as a means to open up the gospel of salvation to the Gentiles (11:11-12, 15, 19, 25, 30). Referring to the unbelieving Jews who had "stumbled" over Christ (11:11a; cf. 9:33 and 11:9), Paul says in 11:11b that "by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles." Similarly, in verse 30 Paul says that his readers had been "shown mercy because of their [i.e., the Jews'] disobedience." One possible way in which the hardening of the Jews led in practical terms to the salvation of the Gentiles is illustrated in Acts 8:1ff, where it was the sudden increased persecution of Christians in Jerusalem following Stephen's martyrdom that caused the Christians to scatter into the surrounding regions and preach the gospel more broadly in Gentile regions (8:4ff; 9:32ff; cf. 28:25-28). This sudden intensification of persecution reflected a hardening of the unbelieving Jews after the preceding period of responsiveness to God's prevenient grace referred to above (cf. Acts 2:41, 47; 3:25-26; 4:4; 5:14-16; 6:7). Jesus had prophesied beforehand that God would turn the focus of his particular prevenient grace from the Jews to the Gentiles in this way (Matthew 21:33-22:14), as had Isaiah, whom Paul quotes to this effect in Romans 10:20-21.

The salvation of Gentiles was only a mediate goal for which cause the Jews were hardened, however. Paul goes farther and says, ironically, that the outpouring of particular prevenient grace on the Gentiles was in turn designed by God to make the very Jews that he had hardened jealous for God's favor (11:11, 14; alluding to 10:19, where Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32:21). The goal of this jealousy is nothing less than the ultimate salvation of all Israel (11:26). When this restoration occurs, a central element in God's original reason for first pouring out his prevenient grace on the Jews by electing them through the patriarchs will have at long last been fulfilled. Without delving into competing eschatological views here, this salvation of "all Israel" I take simply to refer to a future generation of Jews before the end of history who will turn en

masse to faith in Christ, the Deliverer, who will at that time “remove ungodliness from Jacob” (11:26).¹⁷

One should note that this progression from (a) hardening of Jews to (b) salvation of Gentiles to (c) jealousy of Jews to (d) salvation of Jews in 11:7-27 reveals the dynamic nature of God's relation to human free will. If we attribute more than symbolic significance to the causal relations involved (i.e., God hardened the Jews *in order to* bring about the salvation of Gentiles; God pursued the salvation of Gentiles *in order to* make the unbelieving Jews jealous; God wanted to bring about the jealousy of the Jews *in order to* foster the salvation of all physical Israel), it is clear throughout this process that God is genuinely responding to the authentically free decisions of the human agents involved in order to accomplish his own long-term goals. Why else would God, for example, have hardened the unbelieving Jews only to intend to undo this hardening later, if he did not believe this temporary hardening to be a necessary step in the process of bringing both Gentiles and Jews to faith? But why would it be a *necessary* step, unless God indeed constrains himself to respect the integrity of authentically free human agency? God apparently knows that it will not be possible to influence the mass of unbelieving Jews to *freely* accept Christ unless they are first made jealous of the spiritual blessings enjoyed by Gentile believers. God thus determined to harden those Jews who would not believe in Christ (which he may justly do because they are unbelievers who have rejected his universal and particular prevenient grace) in order to make possible a broader dispensing of particular prevenient grace to the Gentiles, whose salvation would then be used to foster the jealousy of unbelieving Jews. All such responses and counter-responses would appear to be merely hollow maneuvering when considered within a deterministic system such as Calvinism, in which God is said to unilaterally determine the occurrence of all events including the faith and repentance of man.

To sum up, in Romans chapter eleven Paul states several facts that will be important to bear in mind when interpreting the remainder of chapter nine below. First, Paul clearly believes that the physical descendants of Israel still retain a special standing with God in the sense of being “beloved for the sake of the fathers” (11:28). Despite their majority rejection of the Christ, God has not rejected his long-term plans for them, central to which is God's desire to bring the entire nation to saving faith in Christ (11:26). Second, a necessary step in this long-term plan has been the *hardening* of the unbelieving Jewish nation (11:7, 25), not to be confused with an outright rejection of them, which would constitute unfaithfulness to his promises to the patriarchs. God has hardened the unbelieving Jews in order to expand the opportunities for the revelation of gospel truth to the Gentiles. This strategy is in turn designed to make the Jews jealous so that they will be inclined to faith in Christ when God decides that the “fullness of the Gentiles” has

come and deems the time to be right to lift the hardening of unbelieving Jews (11:25).

Analysis of Romans 9:19-29

Who Resists His Will?

Returning now to Romans chapter nine, recall that Paul has just responded in verse 14 to an accusation of injustice in God by quoting God's words to Moses to the effect that God has the right to extend the "mercy" and "compassion" of particular prevenient grace to whomever he wishes. Paul then developed his argument by appealing to the example of Pharaoh to demonstrate that God also has the right to harden any unbeliever in order to accomplish his own ends.

Now in verse 19 Paul anticipates an objection to this notion of hardening. If God may truly harden an unbeliever as described in verses 17-18, then "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" (vs. 19). It is easy to misunderstand this objection as simply a restatement of the objection presented in verse 14, only with the difference that in verse 19 the objection is applied instead to the phenomenon of hardening, to the effect that God would be unjust to choose one person for hardening but not another. Such an interpretation, however, misses the import of the objection in verse 19. Unlike the objection in verse 14, which dealt with the moral implications of the fact that God chooses some but not others to be recipients of particular prevenient grace, the objection here in verse 19 focuses not so much on the question of how the recipients of hardening might be selected, but instead on the moral implications that follow from the *results* of hardening. Specifically, once God has hardened a person, how can he still hold such a person accountable if it is impossible for that person to resist God's hardening influence? On what basis can God blame the one whom God himself has caused to become further entrenched in unbelief, such that the one thus hardened has a diminished receptivity to the revealed truths of God? (Note that Paul's use of "still" in vs. 19 refers back to the hardening mentioned in vs. 18, indicating that he is addressing the situation of those who have already been hardened. Consequently, the phrase "resists His will" is best interpreted as referring specifically to God's *will to harden*, considered in the immediate context of vss. 17-18, in which the notion of hardening as a unilateral act of God has just been introduced.)

Potter and Pottery

Paul responds to this objection by appealing to the unequal relationship between God and man as Creator and creature, employing the image of a potter and his pottery:

“On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? 21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?” (9:20-21)

Paul’s words here closely resemble God’s words in Isaiah 45:9 (cf. also Job 33:13; 38:2; 40:1-2, 8):

“Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker—An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you doing?’ Or the thing you are making say, ‘He has no hands’?” (Isaiah 45:9)

The primary thrust of each of these passages is that the divine potter has an inherent right to do as he wishes with the clay, to have specific intentions, plans, and goals for his creatures, and to work toward these goals without first gaining the creature’s consent. Thus, if God wishes to harden an individual, and if God is not under any self-imposed constraints that would prevent him from doing so (e.g., the individual in question is not presently exercising faith and repentance, thus God is not under a self-imposed obligation to dispense saving grace to him), then God is free to harden that person, despite the fact that the person did not directly request the hardening nor can he resist the hardening as it is being applied. Thus in the case of Pharaoh, for example, God could rightly choose to harden Pharaoh in his stubborn unbelief as a means for God to glorify himself in the process of delivering his people out from under Egyptian bondage.

We must be careful at this point not to make either of two common mistakes in our understanding of Paul’s use of the potter/pottery metaphor here in Romans nine. First, Paul’s use of this metaphor has often been taken to indicate that an individual is entirely passive in the process of conversion, just as the clay is entirely passive in the hands of the potter. However, to allow the metaphor this unqualified scope is to ignore the broader context of these verses. As noted above, the objection that Paul is here rebutting deals specifically with the question of whether God may still hold unbelievers whom he has hardened accountable for their rejection of him. Consequently, the pottery immediately in view in verse 20 refers to the unbeliever who has been hardened at the discretion of God, without the unbeliever’s consent. Though such a person may be considered passive in regard to the process and results of hardening itself, this does not entail that the one hardened by God is passive in every possible broader sense. Most importantly, as I discussed earlier, God chooses recipients of hardening only from among those who have already actively suppressed the truth revealed via God’s universal prevenient grace.

The hardened unbeliever thus actively contributed to fulfilling the conditions that made possible his hardening by God in the first place. More generally, the fact that hardening is dispensed unilaterally at God's discretion (the same as is its counterpart prevenient grace, as I have argued throughout this essay) emphatically does *not* entail that *all* of God's dealings with people are conducted in a unilateral, irresistible fashion of this sort. It is clear, for example, that saving grace is not so dispensed, as I argued earlier based on evidence from Romans chapters four and eleven.

Second, we must be careful not to assume from Romans 9:20-21 that the potter must necessarily have only one purpose in mind for a given lump of clay and inexorably work to achieve only that predetermined purpose, regardless what the malleability of the clay turns out to be. The fact that the potter has specific goals in mind for the clay does not entail that these goals may not be contingent and therefore subject to change. Those who believe otherwise would do well to carefully consider Jeremiah 18:1-12, a passage that Paul almost certainly had in mind when writing Romans chapter nine:

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, 2 "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I shall announce My words to you." 3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. 4 But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

5 Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 6 "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. 7 "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; 8 if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. 9 "Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; 10 if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it. 11 "So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds.'" 12 "But they will say, 'It's hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.' (Jeremiah 18:1-12)

The unavoidable central point of the potter/pottery metaphor in this passage is that the potter's plans for the pot are *contingent* upon the responsiveness of the clay. That is, God's response to and plan for Israel is contingent upon Israel's response to God. (The significance of this passage in this regard has been noted by numerous commentators; e.g., Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, IVP, pp. 31-32.) Though God may initially have had promising plans for Israel, these plans could be changed and Israel be "remade" (vs. 4) into a different vessel, in the event that Israel responded as described in verse 12 (each "according to the stubbornness of his evil heart"). Conversely, if Israel were to turn from its evil, God would "relent concerning the calamity" He had planned to bring on it (vs. 8). In either case, the key point is that *God's plan for Israel was conditioned on Israel's response to Him*.

One might object that while Jeremiah may have employed the potter/pottery metaphor to emphasize the contingent nature of the potter's plans, Paul was not bound by that particular use of the metaphor and chose to employ it for a different emphasis in Romans chapter nine. That is, Paul intended to emphasize the unilateral nature of God's actions (and thus the passivity of man) in the potter/pottery metaphor, without invoking any contingency in God's intentions.

However, to understand Paul's use of the potter/pottery metaphor in this way is to unduly maximize differences and minimize similarities between his and Jeremiah's usage of the same metaphor. Granted, Paul's use of the pottery metaphor is intended to emphasize God's right to do as he wishes with the clay, to pursue whatever goals and intentions for the clay as are compatible with his own nature. Moreover, this right of the potter over the clay includes the right for the potter to act unilaterally, as God does in the dispensing of particular prevenient grace and in the process of hardening discussed by Paul in the preceding verses 7-18. Indeed, it is clear in view of this preceding context that the term "vessel for honorable use" in 9:21, though perhaps having an abstract, general reference to any recipient of God's grace (no matter what form of grace it may be), refers in the immediate case more specifically to the Jewish recipients of particular prevenient grace discussed in the preceding passage. Similarly, though the vessel "for common [lit., dishonorable] use" in 9:21 may be taken in the general case to refer to any recipient of God's judgment, in the immediate case it refers more specifically to those who like Pharaoh are unilaterally hardened by God. (Within this context, the "same lump" mentioned in vs. 21 is seen to refer to the whole of humanity considered prior to the exercise of faith; that is, the common population from which God may select recipients of either particular prevenient grace or hardening. All the members of this population reject God's universal prevenient grace and do not deserve any grace from God.) Thus, it is clearly true that Paul wishes to emphasize

the right of God to act as he sees fit without a person's prior consent, even as this includes unilateral actions on God's part.

Recognition of the above fact, however, does not lead to the conclusion that Paul's and Jeremiah's uses of the potter/pottery metaphor are wholly different. Indeed, there are important similarities (beyond the obvious common reference to potters and pottery). For one thing, Jeremiah like Paul includes consideration of the divine sovereignty in his usage of the potter/pottery metaphor. Jeremiah's acknowledgement of God's sovereignty is captured explicitly in 18:4, where the spoiled clay is said to have been reconstructed into a new pot "*as it pleased the potter to make.*" In remaking the spoiled clay into a new pot, God was exercising his sovereign right to work toward his own specific goals and intentions for the pot of Israel. Not only this, but throughout Jeremiah's passage it is clear that the contingent nature of God's actions toward Israel (i.e., contingent on Israel's response) does *not* compromise God's sovereignty. Notice the recurrent phrases, "I will . . .," "I am . . .," "I might . . .," that occur throughout the passage. God is clearly in charge of the situation, though he chooses to make some of his actions contingent upon Israel's response to him. This sense of sovereignty is captured in the question God poses to Israel, "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" (vs. 6) The potter in Jeremiah's usage of the metaphor is sovereign, just as is the potter in Paul's employment of the same metaphor.

Conversely, it is not true that all contingency is lacking in Paul's use of the potter/pottery metaphor. This fact is easily missed because of the strong emphasis on God's unilateral action in Romans 9:20-21, where Paul's immediate concern is to show that the objects of God's hardening just like the objects of God's particular prevenient grace (cf. 9:7-18) have no right to insist that God treat them in one or another of these ways. (That is, God has sole discretion whether to continue aggressively pursuing the salvation of some but not of others who have suppressed universally revealed truth.) This emphasis on God's unilateral, noncontingent action might appear to extend into Paul's continued use of the pottery metaphor in 9:22-23 as well in reference to "vessels of wrath" and "vessels of mercy." Indeed, 9:22-23 is often interpreted as proving that God's reprobation of some to damnation and his election of others to salvation is an entirely unilateral, noncontingent act, designed to magnify his glory by the display of his wrath on the one group and his contrasting mercy on the other group. Supporters of this view appeal to the twin facts that (a) 9:24 clearly identifies the "vessels of mercy" in 9:23 as believers in Christ, "called not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles," and (b) there is no explicit reference to any contingency in God's actions in Paul's use of the potter/pottery metaphor in 9:20-23. I will argue in the next two sections that these facts

notwithstanding, Paul's continued use of the potter/pottery metaphor in 9:22-23 does assume a contingent understanding of the condemnation of the "vessels of wrath," on the one hand, and of the salvation of the "vessels of mercy," on the other hand.

Vessels of Wrath, Vessels of Mercy

In order to see the role contingency plays in Paul's treatment of the "vessels" of pottery in 9:22-23, it is necessary for us to first examine the structure of these verses more carefully, as well as consider the relation of this passage to Paul's discussion of the Jewish nation in chapter eleven. The first observation to be made is that there is an important shift in focus in Paul's use of the potter/pottery metaphor between verse 21 and 22. This shift in focus is signaled by Paul's switch to the suppositional "What if . . ." in verse 22.

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? 23 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, 24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. (9:22-24)

The evidence is compelling that beginning in verse 22 Paul has shifted the intended referents of the various "vessels" in his discussion. This shift in reference is clearest for the "vessels of mercy" in verse 23. Instead of referring to the physical descendants of Israel, who as argued above were recipients of particular prevenient grace (cf. the "vessel for honorable use" in vs. 21, considered in terms of the prior context), the "vessels of mercy" in verse 23 refer to *believers in Christ*, as verse 24 makes clear (cf. 9:30; 10:12). This shift in reference from the one group to the other is not unnatural, for as I have noted throughout this essay there are numerous parallels in Romans between the physical descendants of Israel and believers in Christ. For example, both groups are considered by Paul to be recipients of God's mercy (in the form of particular prevenient grace to the one group and saving grace to the other); both groups were corporately elected beforehand to their respective positions (11:2 in reference to the Israelites; 8:29 in reference to believers); both groups were adopted as children of God (though in different senses of the term) and therefore are partakers in God's glory (9:4 in reference to the Israelites; 8:29-30 in reference to believers).¹⁸ The very fact that Paul needs to explicitly identify the vessels of mercy in verse 24 as being believers in Christ is itself an indication that Paul now wishes to apply this image of privileged pottery to a new referent (viz., believers in Christ) instead of continuing to apply this image to the Jewish people as he had done in verse 21 (see the above discussion in

regard to vs. 21).

Likewise, the image of “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” in verse 22 has a referent that is more specific than that attached to the vessel “for common use” in verse 21, which was merely a metaphorical extension of the general notion of hardened unbelievers discussed in verses 17-18 (exemplified by Pharaoh). The “vessels of wrath” in verse 22 refer more specifically to *the hardened, unbelieving Jews*, Paul’s concern for which it should be recalled has motivated Paul’s entire discussion in Romans chapter nine and following. We know that the “vessels of wrath” here in 9:22 refer specifically to the unbelieving Jews (not to the reprobate more generally as this verse is usually interpreted) because of the specific relation between them and the “vessels of mercy” asserted by Paul here in 9:22-23 in embryonic form but developed in more detail in 11:11-25. That relation, simply put, is that the Jews who refused to believe in Christ were hardened (and were “endured with much patience” by God in this hardened, unbelieving state; 9:22) *for the express purpose* that salvation might be brought more widely to the Gentiles. Consider again Paul’s words in 9:22-23, that God “endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction . . . *in order that* He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy.” The relation expressed here is not simply that the display of God’s wrath in the one case contrastively magnifies the display of his mercy in the other case, as according to the standard Calvinist interpretation of this passage.¹⁹ Instead, the relation between the unbelief of the Jews and the salvation of the Gentiles is more directly causal in nature, as is shown by the parallel references in chapter eleven. In 11:11 Paul says of the unbelieving Jews who were hardened (cf. 11:7) that “*by their transgression*” [i.e., by their rejection of Christ] salvation has come to the Gentiles.” Likewise, in 11:12 Paul declares that the transgression of the unbelieving Jews is “riches for the world” and “riches for the Gentiles,” and in 11:15 he says that the Jews’ rejection of Christ yields “the reconciliation of the world.” In 11:19, speaking of the tree of spiritual Israel, Paul confirms that a Gentile believer can rightly say that “branches [i.e., unbelieving Jews] were broken off *so that* I [the Gentile believer] might be grafted in.” In 11:25 Paul speaks of the hardening of the unbelieving Jews lasting only until “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in,” and in 11:30 Paul states that his fellow believers “have been shown mercy *because of* their [i.e., the unbelieving Jews] disobedience.” These various statements in chapter eleven clearly express a causal relation parallel to that found in 9:22-23, namely, that the unbelief and subsequent hardening of the Jews led in God’s plan to greater opportunities for the salvation of the Gentiles.

These parallels between chapter eleven and 9:22-23, then, clarify that Paul intended the “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” in 9:22 to refer to the unbelieving Jews whom he had hardened.

We have seen as well that the “vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory” in 9:23 refer to believers in Christ. These referents constitute a shift in focus from Paul’s preceding discussion of (a) hardened unbelievers considered more generally, and (b) the physical descendants of Israel as objects of God’s mercy in the form of particular prevenient grace. We might well ask why it is that Paul shifts his focus in this way here in 9:22-23. The answer is that he is not yet finished answering the charge against God’s faithfulness alluded to in 9:6a. In order to complete his response to this charge, Paul wishes to turn our attention in 9:22-23 to spiritual Israel (i.e., believers in Christ), on the one hand, and the hardened body of (unbelieving) physical Israel, on the other hand, so as to explore in more detail the relationship between these two groups, a relationship in which hardening plays a key role. This exploration continues from the end of chapter nine into chapter eleven, where as we saw earlier, spiritual Israel (particularly as it includes Gentile believers in Christ) is said to function in God’s plan as a provocation to the unbelieving Jews, to make them jealous for salvation (10:19; 11:11, 14). Thus, the unbelieving Jewish “vessels of wrath” were hardened for the time being in order to facilitate the arrival of salvation among the Gentiles (cf. my earlier analysis of Romans chapter eleven), which in turn is designed to provoke the Jews to jealousy and ultimately bring about the salvation of all the Jews (i.e., the very same “vessels of wrath” formerly hardened). The hardening of unbelieving physical Israel, then, far from being an instrument employed by God to ensure their ultimate reprobation, is instead merely one step in a broader plan to bring about the Jews’ ultimate *salvation*. This is the final piece in Paul’s extended answer to the question with which we began in 9:6, namely, whether God’s promises to the patriarchs have failed. Paul can firmly reply that God is in fact still faithful to his promises, because God is still pursuing the salvation of the elect physical descendants of Israel, even using their present hardening as a means to this end.

Prepared for Destruction, Prepared for Glory

Having established the parallel between chapter eleven and 9:22-23, we are now in a position to see how Paul’s usage of the potter/pottery metaphor in 9:22-23 assumes a contingent understanding of God’s relation to the two groups of “vessels” in these verses. Beginning with the “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,” two questions may be raised in regard to these: (a) *On what basis* are these vessels of wrath hardened (cf. 11:7) and thereby destined to “destruction,” and (b) in what sense can they be said to be “*prepared*” for this end? The phrasing of the text suggests an immediate answer to the first question, namely, that these vessels can be hardened and destined for destruction precisely because they justly bear the force of God’s *wrath*. This is an important point: These are not “vessels of wrath” because they have been hardened; instead, they can be hardened (at God’s discretion) *because they are*

vessels of wrath. As Arminius states:

“For the hardened are not the object of the Divine wrath, nor is hardening the cause of the wrath, but rather the Divine wrath is the cause of the hardening; and God in the act of hardening deals with those with whom He is already angry, that is, who by the very act are already vessels of wrath. . . . He does not harden any except those who have already become vessels of the most just Divine wrath by their own fault. Indeed, the whole Scripture teaches that the hardening is the effect and sign of the Divine wrath” (“Analysis of the Ninth Chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, p. 516-517; see also Arminius’ excellent discussion of this and related issues in “Examination of Perkin’s Pamphlet,” *ibid.*, pp. 342-344).

As was discussed earlier, Scripture makes it plain that hardening is always undertaken by God with reference to man’s sin, not apart from it. The “vessels of wrath” (i.e., the hardened unbelieving Jews) in 9:22 were thus “prepared for destruction” and made objects of God’s wrath because of their sin, not because they had been chosen for reprobation or preterition apart from any prior reference to sin.

This leads us to consider in what sense the vessels of wrath in 9:22 are said to have been “prepared” for destruction. Clearly, the term “prepared” implies that God has an intention or purpose in mind, an intention toward which Paul has already argued God has a right to work to achieve. The standard Calvinist interpretation of this verse is that the preparation in view is rooted in a timeless, unalterable, and noncontingent decree that necessitates these vessels’ ultimate reprobation. However, once we correctly identify the vessels of wrath in this verse with the hardened Jews of chapter eleven (as argued above), this Calvinist interpretation becomes untenable. It is clear from Paul’s remarks in chapter eleven that the hardened Jews’ “preparation for destruction” was a *tentative* preparation to that end, contingent on the Jews’ continuance in unbelief. As Paul states in 11:23 (using the imagery of branches in union with an olive tree), “they also [i.e., the hardened Jews], *if* they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again.” The sense in which the Jews can be said from this verse to have been “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” clearly presupposes not a static, unalterable divine decree of ultimate reprobation, but rather a divine resolve to render the necessary judgment in the final day (i.e., “the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,” spoken of in Romans 2:5) only *if* the Jews persist in unbelief (i.e., if they continue “storing up wrath” for themselves due to their “stubbornness and unrepentant heart,”

2:5). The “preparation” spoken of in 9:22, then, understood in light of the parallel discussion in chapter eleven expresses an authentic contingency, much in the spirit of Jeremiah’s use of the potter/pottery metaphor considered earlier. (As has often been pointed out by other commentators, it is readily possible on grammatical grounds to take the perfect participle *katertismena* in 9:22 as being in the middle rather than passive voice, in which case the word may convey a reflexive sense: “having prepared *themselves*,” lit., “having put themselves in order.” In this case the role of these vessels of wrath in determining their own destruction is further highlighted.)

In view of the above, if one insists on generalizing a broader lesson from Romans 9:22 beyond the case of the hardened Jews to which this verse refers, that lesson will certainly not be that a select group of humanity is irreversibly consigned (whether by reprobation or preterition) to damnation. Rather, the lesson that may be gleaned from this verse is that those who are justly the objects of God’s wrath are destined to destruction contingent on their perseverance in unbelief, just as the hardened Jews were so destined only insofar as they continued in unbelief (11:23). This principle applies more broadly not merely to a predetermined portion of humanity, but to *all* of humanity, given that all people are or have been at one time the objects of God’s just wrath. Paul developed this point earlier in chapters one-three of Romans, where he argued that “the *wrath of God* is revealed from heaven against *all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (1:18). Paul went on to argue that such ungodliness and unrighteousness has spread to the whole of humanity, charging that “both Jews and Greeks are *all* under sin; as it is written, ‘There is *none* righteous, *not even one*’” (3:9b-10). Being under God’s wrath is not, however, a static condition, as Paul makes clear when he says that God seeks to lead *these same objects of his wrath* to repentance (2:4-5). God desires that those presently under his wrath will repent and become recipients of his mercy. Indeed, every “vessel of mercy” was at one time a “vessel of wrath,” an object of God’s righteous wrath upon sin. As Paul states in Ephesians 2:3-4, the believers to whom he wrote were “all formerly . . . by nature *children of wrath*, even as the rest,” but had now “by grace . . . been saved through faith . . . [and] been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:8, 13). Such verses make it difficult to speak of the “vessels of wrath” (broadly construed) in God’s economy as comprising a static, unfluctuating portion of humanity.

In regard to the “vessels of mercy . . . prepared beforehand for glory,” the main question is in what sense believers in Christ are “prepared beforehand.” There is a clear parallel between the prior preparation for glory mentioned in this verse and the similar expressions in Romans 8:29, where believers are said to have been “foreknown” and “predestined to become conformed to

the image of His [God's] Son.” The parallel extends also to Ephesians 1:4, where believers are said to have been chosen in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that [they] should be holy and blameless before Him.” In all three of these passages there is a *determination* or *election* on God's part that occurs *beforehand* (even before the world was created) and that has in view a particular *glorious end* (viz., conformation of the church to the holy image of Christ; cf. Note 18). I argued earlier that the election of believers to salvation can be viewed from either a corporate or individual perspective, and that both perspectives are legitimate. The emphasis here in 9:23 on believers in Christ having been “prepared beforehand for glory” is a reflection of the corporate perspective on election. From this corporate perspective, God has decreed from eternity that all believers will be joined together in union with Christ as a Body that grows into the fullness of Christ. Because election considered corporately has as its object a Body in view rather than individuals, it can be irrevocable and absolute, contingent upon nothing but God's own pleasure. This corporate view of election to salvation here in 9:23 complements the individual view of election to salvation that is in focus in much of Romans chapter eleven, where Paul speaks of believers in Christ as “branches” in the tree of spiritual Israel who either “stand by [their] faith” (11:20) or else will be “cut off” if they fail to “continue in [God's] kindness” (i.e., do not persevere in faith; 11:21-22). From this individual perspective, election to salvation is necessarily contingent on the present, persevering faith of the individual.

From the above extended discussion I conclude, then, that Romans 9:22-23 does not teach that man is entirely passive in the process of conversion. To view the “vessels” of 9:22-23 as representing an unalterable division of humanity into two static populations as a result of God's unilateral decree is to miss the direct connection between 9:22-23 and chapter eleven, where Paul clearly teaches that the hardened Jews' exclusion from spiritual Israel is contingent on their perseverance in unbelief, and that believers' election to participation in spiritual Israel is contingent on their perseverance in faith in Christ. Given this context, Paul's use of the potter/pottery metaphor in 9:22-23 is therefore best understood in contingent terms similar to those seen in the use of this same metaphor in Jeremiah 18:1-12.

The remainder of the section of Romans chapter nine currently under discussion (through verse 29) is uncontroversial. In Romans 9:24 and following Paul explicitly returns to the distinction between Jews and Gentiles that will take up much of his focus in the next two chapters. His point in verse 24 is that God's corporate election to salvation encompasses the faithful from both groups.²⁰ This echoes his earlier teaching in chapter four that all those who “follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham” belong to spiritual Israel, whether Jew or Gentile (4:12). In verses 25-26 Paul quotes from Hosea 2:23 and 1:10 to show that God indeed intended the

Gentiles to be included in spiritual Israel. In verses 27-28 Paul quotes from Isaiah 10:22-23 and 1:9 to show that this spiritual Israel would be made up of only a remnant of physical Israel. Both points support his observation in Romans 9:23-24 that both Jews and Gentiles have been called to participate by faith in spiritual Israel as “vessels of mercy.”

Section Summary (9:19-29)

Paul began this section in verse 19 by anticipating an objection to his preceding discussion of hardening, namely, “How can God still hold a hardened person accountable if it is impossible for that person to resist God’s hardening influence?” Paul responded to this objection by employing the metaphor of a potter and his pottery in verses 20-21, arguing that God like the potter has a right to do as he wishes with his creation, to have specific intentions, plans, and goals for his creatures, and to work toward these without first gaining the creature’s consent. I cautioned against two common mistakes in interpreting this metaphor. First, we may not rightly conclude from this metaphor that man is completely passive in the process of salvation. The immediate referents of the vessels mentioned in verses 20-21 are the recipients of God’s particular prevenient grace and of his hardening. Though each is dispensed unilaterally by God (as treated by Paul in 9:7-18 and discussed in the corresponding sections above), this does not negate the fact that the population from which God selects these recipients is comprised of all people who suppress God’s universal prevenient grace (see earlier discussion) and thus play an active role in bringing God’s wrath upon themselves. Second, we must be careful not to assume from Romans 9:20-21 that the potter must necessarily have only one purpose in mind for a given lump of clay and inexorably work to achieve only that predetermined purpose. Jeremiah 18:1-12 shows that the potter’s intentions for the clay may be contingent on the response of the clay to the potter’s shaping. I argued that the same is true of the “vessels of wrath” and the “vessels of mercy” in Romans 9:22-23. This quickly becomes apparent once we recognize that Paul intended to identify these two kinds of vessels with the two groups discussed by Paul in Romans chapter eleven, namely, the hardened Jews and believers in Christ. In chapter eleven we learn that God hardened the unbelieving Jews *in order that* salvation might come more broadly to the Gentiles. Consequently, the parallel relation between the “vessels of wrath” and the “vessels of mercy” expressed in 9:23 must be interpreted in this same sense. This parallel, once established, requires that Paul’s use of the pottery metaphor in 9:22-23 not be taken in such a way that would remove the contingent nature of the divine dispensing of saving grace, for chapter eleven makes clear that salvation was yet available to the hardened Jews if they would not persevere in unbelief (11:23), just as the continued salvation of believers was contingent on their perseverance in faith (11:20-21).

I further argued that those people spoken of in verse 22 as “vessels of wrath” (which I took to refer to the hardened unbelieving Jews, as made clear by the parallel to chapter eleven) are not vessels of wrath because they have been hardened; instead, they may be hardened at God’s discretion *because they are vessels of wrath*. Moreover, I argued based on data in chapter eleven that the “preparation” of these vessels for “destruction” must be understood as contingent upon their perseverance in unbelief. I noted that this principle of a contingent preparation for destruction may be extended to all of humanity, in that Paul taught in Romans chapters one-three and Ephesians 2:4 that believers were once considered objects of God’s wrath like the rest of humanity. Finally, I noted Paul’s reference to the corporate election of believers in verse 23, an election which he argues in verses 24-29 reaches to encompass both Jewish and Gentile believers.

Observations Regarding 9:30 and Following

Before concluding this essay, I should briefly remark on the relatively uncontroversial remainder of Romans chapter nine and chapter ten. In 9:30, Paul addresses again a question he has already dealt with more generally in chapters three and four, namely, how it could be that Gentiles have attained righteousness and participation in spiritual Israel, whereas many Jews (who were elected to receive the privileges of particular prevenient grace as guardians of the oracles of God; 3:2) have not. Paul’s answer is that the majority of the Jews missed God’s righteousness because they sought it through the avenue of works of merit, not by faith (9:32). In chapter 10:1-15 Paul explores this truth yet further, establishing on the basis of various Old Testament passages that salvation for both “Jew and Greek” alike (10:12) is contingent on faith in the good news of Jesus Christ. In 10:16-21 Paul returns his focus to the Jews, using additional Old Testament passages to rebut the objection that not all Israel has had an opportunity to respond in faith to Christ. Paul directly attributes the hardened Jews’ present plight not to any ignorance on their part but to their willful resistance to the truth that has been revealed to them (10:21), just as he argued in chapter one that all men suppress the expressions of God’s universal prevenient grace and thus incur condemnation.

It is in this context that Paul then develops in chapter eleven his final, more detailed account of the hardening of his Jewish contemporaries, an account which I have treated in detail above. As I have noted, Paul concludes in chapter eleven that God has been faithful to his promises to the patriarchs not only in the sense argued in 9:6b that “they are not all [spiritual] Israel who are

descended from [physical] Israel,” but also by virtue of the fact that the present hardening of the Jews does not constitute God’s rejection of them at all but rather is a part of God’s larger plan to bring about their eventual salvation, once they are provoked to jealousy by the salvation of the Gentiles. God thus remains faithful to his promise to aggressively pursue the salvation of the physical descendants of Israel, as well as to his promise to foster a faithful remnant of those who believe from among both Jews and Gentiles. It is the wisdom of this grand plan to “show mercy to all” (11:32) that triggers Paul’s doxology of praise in 11:33-36. In the final analysis, Paul recognizes that God has been the grand initiator in all of this; man has been merely the benefactor and (at best) the willing recipient of God’s various administrations of grace, none of which arose from any wisdom or merit on the part of man. Consequently, all of the glory belongs to God when mankind receives mercy, on the one hand, or else righteous condemnation on the other. As Paul concludes in 11:36, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”²¹

Conclusion

Let me summarize the key characteristics of the exegesis of Romans chapter nine presented in this essay:

1. Paul’s overriding concern in Romans chapters nine-eleven is to show that the present unbelief of the majority of the Jews does not mean that God has been unfaithful to his promises to the Jewish patriarchs or has rejected them (3:3-4; 9:6; 11:1-2, 11, 28-29).
2. Paul presents two major arguments in support of God’s continued faithfulness to his promises. First, Paul argues that God’s promise considered as a God-given assurance to be believed yields an election to salvation that is contingent on the faith of the recipients; therefore, God’s faithfulness to that promise is not compromised by the existence of unbelieving Jews, who by reason of their lack of faith do not participate in the necessary spiritual faith-lineage and are thus not encompassed within the terms of the promise (9:6b; 4:11-16). Second, Paul argues that God’s promise considered as a unilateral choice of God yields an unconditioned, irrevocable election of all the physical descendants of Israel to a position of privileged access to the verbal and incarnate Word of God (9:4-5, 7-13; 11:28-29). God remains faithful to this election despite the unbelief of the Jews, to the point that even his present hardening of the Jews should be seen as simply one necessary step in his broader plan to pursue and bring about the ultimate salvation of all physical Israel (11:11-26, 31-32).

3. Given this broader flow of thought in Romans chapters nine-eleven, I argued that the expressions of God's unilateral, unconditioned election at various points throughout 9:7-21 refer not to the dispensing of saving grace as Calvinists claim but instead to the election of the Jewish people to be recipients of one form of *particular prevenient grace*, by which they were "entrusted with the oracles of God" (3:2) and given the privilege of preparing for the arrival of the Christ (9:4-5). When Paul does turn his attention back to the recipients of saving grace in 9:23, the parallels between 9:22-24 and chapter eleven mandate that the dispensing of saving grace be viewed as contingent upon the faith of the recipients.
4. Paul characterizes the divine action of hardening as being applied unilaterally at God's discretion to unbelievers, who have rejected the universal prevenient grace offered by God (1:18f). Hardening is not necessarily permanent, and may even be applied for *redemptive* purposes, as in the case of the Jewish nation (11:11-32). Thus, the concept of hardening as employed by Paul in Romans does *not* equate to ultimate reprobation (or else preterition), as Calvinists commonly but wrongly suppose.

The above exegesis of Romans chapter nine thus agrees with the fundamental Arminian tenet that salvation is dispensed contingent upon the authentically-free exercise of faith on the part of the recipients. Yet, at the same time this exegesis recognizes in the teaching of Romans chapter nine a unilateral, sovereign election that God is at liberty to dispense without regard to volitional factors that might differentiate the recipients from the nonrecipients of that grace. Though this latter type of election has implications for the salvation of individuals, it does not directly concern the dispensing of saving grace itself, but instead that of particular prevenient grace. The central theological lesson to be gleaned from Romans chapter nine, then, is that *God may sovereignly discriminate in the dispensing of particular prevenient grace*. That is, God maintains an absolute, sovereign right to either extend, withhold, or diminish the opportunities for any unbeliever (i.e., one who suppresses the truth revealed by universal prevenient grace) to access further truth and have the ability to freely respond in faith to that truth in a way leading to salvation. God has sole discretion to decide *if* and *when* he will extend particular prevenient grace to any unbeliever or conversely harden any unbeliever.

What implications does this exegesis of Romans chapter nine have for the broader debate between Calvinists and Arminians? Though clearly the above analysis ultimately favors Arminianism in that it recognizes the contingent nature of the divine dispensing of saving grace, the exegesis in this essay also serves as a correction to those Arminians who would tend to view

all of God's decisions toward humans as contingent in nature. As we have seen above, God does in fact often act unilaterally without reference to volitional factors within humans, in particular when he dispenses (or withholds) particular prevenient grace. This may be a conclusion hard for some Arminians to accept, who are accustomed to thinking of God as always taking *every* available opportunity to draw each individual toward salvation (see Note 9 for one indication that Arminius himself would have objected to such thinking). My exegesis of Paul's teaching in this chapter leads me to conclude that God does not necessarily act in this way. Though God's genuine desire to see all people saved indeed constrains him to extend universal prevenient grace to all people, the teaching of Romans chapter nine is that God is under no obligation to extend grace beyond that point, but instead may be selective in the dispensing of additional, particular prevenient grace. This in no way diminishes the magnitude of God's love for humanity; it instead simply reflects the biblical balance between the expression of God's love and the expression of his holy wrath upon sin. God's grace is unfathomable, it is true. But God's holiness requires that only *condemnation*, not grace, be considered *obligatory* to one who has suppressed God's truth and violated the Law of God. It is to God's unending glory that in his wisdom he devised a way for those who merit such condemnation to become the recipients of saving grace by faith in Christ. Yet, God is not bound to draw all persons in the same measure or in the same manner toward this free gift of salvation, though all persons do have sufficient means (through the dispensing of universal prevenient grace) to draw near to God in faith (cf. my earlier discussion of Romans 1:21 and 2:4).

In regard to Calvinism, my arguments in this essay--if successful--strike a direct blow against the doctrine of unconditioned, particular election by removing support for that doctrine from what is often considered to be the definitive passage in its favor. This does not mean, of course, that arguments for the Calvinist understanding of election cannot be formulated on the basis of other passages. Without the benefit of Romans chapter nine, however, the task for Calvinists in this regard will be considerably more difficult. I hope to address some of the other major passages of Scripture adduced in the Calvinist-Arminian debate in future essays.

Notes:

1. There are also numerous problems of a logical/philosophical nature raised by the Calvinist conception of unconditional, particular election, some of which I have addressed in the essay "Philosophical Reflections on Free Will" and (more directly) in its companion essay "The Wills of God."

2. The reader may be wondering why I do not simply adopt one of the existing Arminian accounts of Romans chapter nine. While I agree with the basic tenets of Arminianism (most importantly for present purposes, that election to salvation is *contingent upon* an authentic faith-response on the part of man), I have not felt satisfied with any of the existing exegeses of Romans chapter nine by Arminian theologians with which I am familiar. Arminius himself interprets Romans nine as teaching a contingent election of individuals to salvation based on faith foreseen by God (“Analysis of the Ninth Chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 485-519). This position in my opinion leads to certain intractable problems of a philosophical nature concerning the nature of divine foreknowledge, problems that are avoided if one instead adopts a corporate view of election to salvation as primary. It also seems to me that Arminius like his Calvinist opponents failed to adequately relate Romans chapter nine to its broader context, including Romans chapter eleven.

Though there are important insights in Robert Shank’s analysis (*Elect in the Son*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1970, 1989; pp. 115ff), in my opinion Shank fails to provide sufficient evidence for what is perhaps the crucial exegetical claim of his analysis, namely, that there is a shift in the Apostle Paul’s train of thought between Romans 9:29 and 9:30, from the hypothetical case (that God *could* deal with us in absolute, unconditional terms if he so wished) to the actual case (in which, according to Shank, Paul teaches that God does *not* deal with us so; cf. p.120). Paul’s statement in 9:24 (“*even us*, whom He also called . . .”) seems to firmly root Paul’s preceding comments regarding God’s unilateral election in historical reality, not merely in a hypothetical sphere; hence, I find Shank’s analysis unconvincing in this regard.

I have been similarly dissatisfied with other Arminian accounts of Romans nine that I have encountered, such as Cottrell’s view that the election in Romans nine is merely an unconditional election to “service” without relevance to one’s salvation (Jack Cottrell, “The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989, pp. 97-119; see especially p. 114). Though I agree with Cottrell that the election in view in much of Romans nine, though unconditional in nature, is not an election to salvation, it seems clear to me that the grace said to be extended by God to the Jews in this passage does not relate merely to their service, but instead to something more directly preparatory to their participation (or nonparticipation) in the covenant of grace (cf. my treatment of the notions of particular prevenient grace and hardening in my essay below). Also, I disagree with Cottrell’s understanding of Romans to the effect that God has rejected his chosen

people, the Jews. As I will note in my essay below, it is clear that Paul teaches just the opposite, and that because of his “irrevocable” election of them (Romans 11:28-29) God will continue to pursue the Jews until “all Israel is saved” (11:26).

3. Of course, an “unconditioned” election as just defined in the text is nonetheless “conditioned” on factors independent of human volition. So then, the terms “conditioned” and “unconditioned” (and “contingent” and “noncontingent”) are not entirely descriptively accurate. They (or similar terms) are, however, in common usage, and in the absence of good alternatives I will continue to employ them in this essay.

4. Calvinists also sometimes stress that in these verses it is *precisely the same set* of persons who are foreknown that are also predestined, called, justified, and glorified (note the repetition of “whom He . . .” in 8:29-30). This purported fact is held to support both the efficacy of unconditional election and the guaranteed perseverance of the saints in faith (given that glorification is seen as the guaranteed end for all who begin the process described in these verses).

This argument, however, fails on several accounts. For one thing, the “glorification” spoken of in 8:30 refers at least in part if not completely to an accomplished event, not merely a future glorification as is commonly assumed (see my essay “Hidden Glory” for detailed discussion). Consequently, no unconditional guarantee of ultimate and final glorification is suggested in these verses that might somehow preclude the possibility of apostasy from the faith. More broadly, the above Calvinist argument in regard to Romans 8:29-30 suffers from the same sort of fallacy as does the commonly heard argument for limited atonement based on the fact that Jesus is said to have died for the elect (8:32-33; cf. John 10:11, 15; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25; Matthew 1:21; Titus 2:14). To say that Christ died for the elect does not entail that he died *only* for them and for no others, as Jack Cottrell has rightly noted. “A particular body of people is being addressed, in the grammatical form of first person plural. To say to any [particular] audience, ‘Christ died for us!’ does not [logically] imply ‘for us and no one else’” (*Basic Theology Syllabus*, 65; quoted by Terry Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989, p. 73). Similarly, Paul’s focus in Romans chapter eight is clearly on the church, those who participate in corporate election by way of being in Christ; therefore, Paul can truly say as he speaks of the church that this corporate body was foreknown, predestined, called, etc. This does not entail, however, that each of these characteristics is only ever true of people who attain to ultimate salvation. This is demonstrated quite straightforwardly by Christ’s statement that “many are called but few are

chosen” (Matthew 22:14), by which we may conclude that some who are “called” (cf. Romans 8:30) nonetheless fail to ultimately participate in the Body of Christ. Similar arguments could be constructed for other of the characteristics named in Romans 8:29-30, depending on the interpretation placed on each.

5. For more in-depth discussion of the corporate view of election, see the following three works:

William G. MacDonald, “The Biblical Doctrine of Election,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989, pp. 207-229.

Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1970, 1989.

William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election*, Wipf & Stock, 2001 (reprint of 1990 edition--new ISBN: 1579105734314).

Klein’s work is the most exhaustive in regard to the corporate nature of election and is particularly recommended.

6. This application of the “children of God” motif to the broader Jewish nation can be seen throughout Scripture (e.g., Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 14:1; Jeremiah 3:22; 31:9; Isaiah 63:8, 16; 64:8; Hosea 11:1), as in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), where the “sons” of the father refer to two separate groups within the Jewish nation to whom Jesus ministered. The younger son represented the “sinners” who were placing their faith in Christ, while the older son represented the “religious” (but unbelieving) Jews and Jewish leaders who took offense at Jesus’ association with such “sinners” (cf. Luke 15:1-2). It is clear here as in Romans 9:4 and numerous other passages that the notion “children of God” can be used to refer to elect physical Jews (including unbelieving Jews) in addition to the more familiar theological usage of the term as referring to believers in Christ (e.g., Romans 8:14; Galatians 3:26).

7. I am indebted to Robert Shank’s work *Elect in the Son* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1970, 1989; see especially pp. 117ff) for first alerting me to the significance of Romans chapter eleven for a proper understanding of Romans chapter nine. The careful reader will note both important similarities and important differences between Shank’s and my own interpretation of these passages (see Note 2).

8. Arminius alludes to this twofold function of prevenient grace: “Sinful man, after the perpetration of sin, has such a knowledge of the law as is sufficient for accusing, convicting, and condemning him: And this knowledge itself is capable of being employed by God when calling him to Christ, that He may, through it, compel man to repent and to flee to Christ” (“Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Art. XVII, 1, p. 720).

9. Arminius makes a similar point: “God is not bound to employ all the modes which are possible to Him for the salvation of all men: He has performed his [*officio*] part, when he has employed either one or more of these possible means for saving” (“Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Art. XVII, 7, p. 721; see also point #12, same page).

10. It is a separate question whether, once a person begins to respond favorably to prevenient grace extended by God (whether universal or particular), God may then *in response* extend additional particular prevenient grace. Such subsequent dispensings of particular prevenient grace (in contrast to the initial dispensing treated by Paul here in Romans 9:6-13) may rightly be considered contingent in nature, conditioned on man’s prior favorable response. That God does act thusly is a standard position of Arminians, as reflected in Arminius’ words below:

“. . . while they are destitute of the knowledge of Christ, yet God has not left Himself without witness, but even during that period has revealed to them some truth concerning His power and goodness; which benefits *if they had rightly used*, at least according to their conscience, *He would have granted them greater grace*; according to that, ‘To him that hath shall be given’ [Matthew 13:12] . . . ‘All men are called with some calling,’ namely, by that witness of God by which they may be brought to find God by feeling after Him, and by that truth which they ‘hold,’ or detain, ‘in unrighteousness,’ that is, whose effect they hinder in themselves; and by that writing of the law upon their minds, according to which they have their own thoughts accusing them. But this calling, though it is not a saving one, as from which salvation cannot be immediately obtained, may yet be said to be antecedent to the saving grace by which Christ is offered, and, *if rightly used, will acquire that grace from God’s mercy.*” (“Examination of Perkin’s Pamphlet,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 483-484, emphasis added)

11. Arminius remarks: “God owes grace to no man simply and absolutely, but can make Himself

a debtor to grace in a twofold mode: by promise, and by the requirement of an act. *By promise*, when He has promised that He will bestow it, whether under condition or without condition. *By the requirement of an act*, when He requires such an act from man as is not performable without His grace; for then He is bound to its bestowal: otherwise He ‘reaps where He has not sown’” (“Conference With Junius,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, p. 246).

12. Arminius makes essentially this same point in reference to the common sinfulness of Jacob and Esau (which Arminius takes to follow from original sin, even prior to their birth): “But as to their being said to have ‘done neither good nor evil,’ that must be understood about that which should discriminate between them, as is explained by Augustine in several places. The Apostle therefore puts aside all reference to the sin by which they might have been distinguished, not to that of which they were both equally guilty” (“Conference With Junius,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, p. 121; cf. also Arminius’ comments on pp. 92-93 of the same).

13. Contrary to what is commonly assumed about election, it seems to me that election is variously viewed in Scripture from *both* an individual perspective *and* a corporate perspective, not just one or the other perspective, though the corporate perspective is perhaps the more primary.

14. In one of his responses to those who argued that God hardens and grants mercy without respect to human sin (i.e., supralapsarian Reformed theologians), Arminius noted that the very expressions involved “imply the preexistence of sin. For no one can ‘have mercy’ (*misereri*) on any but the ‘miserable’ (*miseri*): but no one is miserable except the sinner. ‘Hardening’ also has sin for its cause, nay, contumacious perseverance in sin” (“Examination of Perkin’s Pamphlet,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 345-346).

15. In regard to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, Reformed theologian Robert Reymond has astutely pointed out a weakness in the argument commonly pressed in Arminian circles to the effect that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart only in response to Pharaoh’s prior hardening of his own heart in Exodus 8:15, 32 and 9:34. As Reymond notes, “God twice declared to Moses, even before the series of confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh began, that he would harden Pharaoh’s heart ‘and [thereby] multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 4:21; 7:3). The first time then that it is said that Pharaoh’s heart was hard, the text

expressly declares that it was so 'just as the Lord had spoken' (Exodus 7:13), clearly indicating that Pharaoh's hardness of heart had [come] about due to God's previous promise to harden it. And the first time it is said that Pharaoh 'made his heart hard,' again we are informed that it was so 'just as the Lord had spoken' (8:15; see also 8:19; 9:12, 35)" (Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, p. 359).

Reymond's point notwithstanding, it is still true that Pharaoh like the rest of humanity had prior to his confrontation with Moses "suppress[ed] the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18) and rejected God's universal prevenient grace in his life, thereby making himself a potential (and worthy) candidate for the hardening of God.

16. Arminius further comments on God's just basis for hardening unbelievers: "But if man has with free will committed what deserves hardening, he incurs guilt, and is worthy of wrath, even though he be hardened by that will which cannot be resisted. For, resisting, and that freely, the will revealed in the word, which can be resisted, he falls into that necessity of the Divine decree, also revealed in the word, which cannot be resisted; and so the will of God is done respecting him, by whom the will of God has not been done" ("Analysis of the Ninth Chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 506-507).

17. The salvation of "all Israel" is clearly not yet a reality in history, for it is beyond disagreement that many Jews since the time of Christ have died without faith in him. Consequently, Paul could not possibly mean that all Jews of all time will be saved. It also does not seem likely that Paul is merely referring to only "spiritual" Israel here. It would have been tautological for Paul to say that all spiritual Israel will be saved, for this is already true by definition and would contribute nothing to the force of Paul's overall argument in this passage. Paul's larger argument is that there will come a time (when the "fullness of the Gentiles has come in," vs. 25) when the current hardness of physical Israel will be withdrawn, and the jealousy provoked by the salvation of the Gentiles will yield its effect in bringing the Jews to salvation. This revival of Israel is referred to in emphatic terms, as being a time of "fulfillment" (or "fullness") yielding "riches" (vs. 12), as a resurrection of "life from the dead" (vs. 15), as a time when the "natural branches" will be "grafted back in again" to their native "olive tree" (vss. 23-24). The climax to which these expressions point is the revelation that God's work among the Jews at that end time will be so powerful and convicting that an entire generation of Jews will be brought into the kingdom of Christ. There are various Old Testament allusions to this eschatological triumph of God's Kingdom among the Jews made possible by the coming of the Messiah. See, for example, Isaiah 45:25, 60:21, and 59:20-21. The latter passage (59:20) highlights the fact that this triumph of grace will not occur

apart from the voluntary repentance of the Jews in question.

18. Compare my article “Hidden Glory” for a discussion of how the glory in which believers share is rooted in our being conformed to the image of Christ.

19. As Reformed theologian Robert Reymond states, expressing the standard Calvinist position, the “*ultimate end* of all things in heaven and on earth” is “the unabridged, unqualified *glorification of God himself* in the praises of his saints for his judgment against their enemies and for his stark, contrasting display to them—who equally deserved the same judgment—of his surpassing great grace in Christ Jesus. And *that end* God regards as sufficient reason to decree what he has” (Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, p. 378, emphasis in the original).

20. The fact that in 9:24 Paul differentiates between Jewish and Gentile members of the corporately elected body need not negate the corporate aspect of the decree. Having decreed beforehand to save those who believe and establish a Body in union with Christ (i.e., corporate election to salvation), verse 24 merely establishes that God further determined in the outworking of this decree to pursue individuals from among both Jews and Gentiles to comprise that corporate body and demonstrate the desired reconciliation of man made possible in Christ.

21. Many Calvinists have attempted to use Romans 11:36 as a proof-text in support of theological determinism. However, this verse, phrased as it is in compact, poetic form, is too cryptic to be pressed into the exclusive service of any one theological perspective. Indeed, because of its conciseness the verse is susceptible to various interpretations. In such cases as this, the context of a verse becomes particularly important in guiding its interpretation. Here in Romans chapter eleven, the context provides no indication that any variety of determinism is in view. The immediate occasion of Paul’s statement in verse 36 is his awe over the wisdom of God in designing the complex strategy described in chapter eleven for winning the Jews to faith. As Paul sums up in 11:32, God’s profound strategy involves “shut[ting] up all in disobedience” so that “He might show mercy to all.” The Old Testament quotations in verses 34-35 then attribute to God alone the necessary wisdom to formulate and execute such a marvelous plan of redemption. Within this context, it makes the most sense to interpret verse 36 as referring to the *source, execution, and accomplishment of God’s redemptive plans*, that at every stage God’s plans derive from his wisdom alone and accrue to his glory alone. This does not rule out the presence of contingency within those plans and within their execution, as long as that contingency was anticipated and approved by God himself.

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