

Chapter 41

Sovereign Mercy

(Romans 9:14–16)

God never promised automatic salvation to the entire earthly physical nation of Israel. Not all Jews are God's truly saved people simply because they come from the nation of Israel.

Now Paul raises a question. Is this teaching about predestination unfair? He asks: ¹⁴*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? May it not be!* Verse 14 proves that Paul really is speaking of true and unconditional predestination. God saves some and he does not save others. It is **that** exposition that leads people to say, 'But that is not fair.' A **real** predestination of individuals to salvation has been the theme of verses 6–13.

Paul continues, ¹⁵*For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whomsoever I have mercy, and I will pity whomsoever I pity.'* The word here is 'whomsoever' – anyone God wishes! Paul's answer to the objection is that God's choice of his people has nothing to do with justice; it has to do with mercy! And it has to do with individuals. 'Whomsoever!' Salvation is not deserved at all. It is not a matter of justice or injustice. God would be righteous if he saved no one at all! It is sheer mercy if anyone receives his salvation.

Exodus 33:19 refers to a time when the entire people of God had sinned. Moses intercedes for the nation and asks God to forgive them. He is not asking for justice; he is asking for mercy!

Moses was allowed to see a visible radiation of the mercy and compassion of God. 'I will exercise mercy just as I want to,' said God. It is this that Paul quotes. God's mercy is sovereign mercy. Would God forgive the entire nation? God's answer was that he would exercise mercy just as he wanted to. Paul applies the principle to a slightly different situation. The saved people of Paul's day, who were largely gentiles, were saved because God made a selection concerning the ones to whom he would show mercy.

¹⁶*So then it is not a matter of a person's willing or a person's running, but it is God's having mercy.* Salvation comes through God's powerful call. No one would ever be saved if God did not powerfully work in the lives of some people, summoning them to Jesus Christ. People are spiritually dead. By nature we cannot enter the kingdom of God. We love darkness rather than light. We cannot please God. Not one of us can by nature come to Jesus unless God the Father draws us and he does not draw everyone. Coming to Jesus is something that has to be granted to us by the Father (although we do not generally realize it at the time).

Paul is dealing with salvation, as we have seen. The letter to the Romans has been about individuals receiving a righteousness from God. Paul has been dealing with the way in which the purpose of God does not guarantee salvation to every Israelite. Salvation does not come by nationality. Paul takes examples of predestination from the Old Testament and applies them to the current situation in his own day. He applies them to the matter of salvation. Salvation is not a matter of a person's 'willing' or a person's 'running', but it is entirely a matter of God's having mercy. 'Willing' refers to human desires and to human decisions. 'Running' refers to human efforts and energetic procedures. The two words together refer to the totality of all human striving and abilities. But salvation does not ultimately come from any strivings or aspirations or decisions of men and women. It is

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God who steps into their lives, draws them, changes them, enlightens them, motivates them, empowers them. Back behind all human responses to God is the working of God himself. It is God's mercy that draws his elect. It is God's mercy that preserves every Christian, and follows us all the days of our lives until we his people are brought to final glory. True, we are responsible for our actions but it is God's mercy that saves.

1. Men and women are responsible for their beliefs and actions.

People often say we have 'free will'. This is a somewhat confusing term. What we mean is that we make decisions. We are told to choose life rather than death (Deuteronomy 30:19). Jesus says to his enemies, 'You refuse to come to me that you might have life' (John 5:40). Men and women decide not to have God in their knowledge. We refuse to listen. We reject God when he calls (see Proverbs 1:24).

2. Men and women are governed by what they are. We are governed by our sinful nature. All of the desires and decisions of our lives flow from the heart. But the heart is fallen and corrupt, 'deceitful above all things and desperately wicked' (Jeremiah 17:9). Our hearts are sinful, so all our actions are tainted. So although we have 'free will' in the sense that we are responsible and are not compelled to sin 'against our wills', yet all our desires go the wrong way. We are by nature children of wrath. We cannot by nature receive the things of the Spirit of God.

3. Only the mercy of God turns us around so that we receive God's grace. This is Paul's point. So then it is not a matter of a person's willing or a person's running, but it is God's having mercy. It is God who chooses us, God who draws us. God opens our hearts (Acts 16:14). He makes us alive when we were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1, 5). No one knows the Father except the one whom the Son of God chooses (Matthew 11:27). It is 'through grace' that we believe (Acts 18:27). God has to grant that we repent and get to know the truth (2 Timothy

2:25, 26). It is only those who are ‘called’ – powerfully brought by God’s grace – that get to be saved.

Even faith is not the ultimate cause of salvation. God’s mercy is behind our faith. Not even the ‘willing’ and ‘running’ of our faith is the ultimate reason why we are saved. For that too was in our lifetime and Romans 9:11 has said that God’s choice of us was not determined by anything in our lifetime.

When a person gets saved it seems that he or she has ‘decided for Christ’. We urge people to believe in Jesus and we might invite people to ‘make a decision for Christ’. For some of us it might be a great struggle to believe in Jesus. We can see that if we believe in Jesus there are going to be some big changes in the way we live. Maybe we struggle for months before we yield to Jesus. But Paul is inviting us to discover a secret. Back behind our receiving Jesus was the grace of God. Maybe it did not feel that way at the time. At the time we were saved it felt very much like **my** decision to believe. I surrendered to Christ. Yet Paul is inviting us to discover the predestinating grace of God. We never would have discovered it if God had not told us.