

CHAPTER THREE

GOD’S SELF-REVEALING PURPOSE IN ROMANS 9:22-23

In the previous chapter we discovered that God, in keeping with his nature, created the world and governs it with the ultimate purpose that it would glorify him by magnifying his manifold attributes. This purpose has led to the kind of world we live in and the history that we have experienced and are experiencing. This discovery also forms the first theological truth that favors Calvinism over Molinism.

In this chapter we turn our attention to one passage that states this theological truth succinctly, Romans 9:22-23. This passage is important and controversial enough that it warrants a chapter dedicated to it. The text reads: “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory...?”

The Larger Context

In 9:1-5 we see what appears to be the introduction of Paul’s concern that takes his attention throughout the next three chapters of this epistle. Here we read:

I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

There are at least three reasons behind Paul’s launching into this discussion of Israel and the calling of Gentiles. To begin, in Rom. 8:31-39 he has referred to a number of Old Testament statements or concepts which had been reserved supposedly for national Israel, yet now are being

applied to the New Testament Church (Cf. 8:31, 32, 33, 34, 36). The apostle knows that readers will wonder about God's dealing with Israel.

Next, Paul has referred in the immediately preceding context to God's faithfulness and the security of his love. Yet, the reader, Paul knows, will ask, "What about God's covenant faithfulness to Israel?" If that does not hold up, then perhaps his faithfulness to the New Covenant people of God will not either.

Finally, Paul is addressing in the letter a Jew/Gentile controversy in the Roman church. He knows that especially his Jewish readers will contemplate his teaching of the preceding context and how this would relate to national Israel.

By and large, it is not merely the question of Israel that Paul launches into within these three chapters, but a justification for God, i.e. that God is faithful to his promises, even though the reality among first century Jews is that most have rejected the Christ and so could lead some to think otherwise. More to the point (as will be seen from verse 6), it must be shown that God keeps his Word and it does not fail.¹

Paul's Focus On The Eternal Condition Of His Fellow Israelites

Knowing the motivation for Paul's current discussion now prepares us to see more clearly what he writes in this first paragraph of this section (1-5). Paul wants the Romans to know he is sincere and telling the truth when he writes he has great sorrow and anguish over the current state of the majority of Israelites—even to the point that he could wish himself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his kinsmen who have had such a special place in God's plan of redemption and had so many benefits from God.

¹ John Piper, *The Justification Of God: An Exegetical And Theological Study Of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 19, agrees.

The most important clause is this one: “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ, for the sake of my brothers...” (v. 3). By wording this clause in the way he does, Paul expresses that he wishes something that he knows is impossible.² What cannot happen is that someone who is in Christ can be cut off from Christ and his love (he just stated this in 8:35-39). Notice that he also uses the word “accursed” (*anathema*). This adjective is often used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the Hebrew *cherem*, which stands for something devoted to divinity positively or negatively.³ Used negatively, it speaks of objects or people set aside for judgment by God. Most likely that is the way Paul uses it here since this understanding fits with the preceding context in chapter 8 and also that is the way Paul uses the term elsewhere (1 Cor. 12:3; 16:22; Gal. 1:8, 9).

Amazingly enough Paul is writing that he could wish himself assigned to perdition (eternal judgment) for the sake of his fellow countrymen in light of their plight. John Piper is right when he writes of this wish:

*Paul’s willingness to be cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers makes sense only if Paul believes his [national] brothers are in a plight as serious as the one he is willing to enter for their sake. Thus, the words Paul chooses...to express his love are chosen because they express (albeit indirectly and thus sensitively) the precise condition of his unbelieving kinsmen: they are anathema, separated from Christ.*⁴

The realization of what Paul is wishing here not only brings clarity to his concern, but it also appears to put in doubt an interpretation put forth a number of years ago that Paul is not speaking

² *ēuchomēn gar* (“For I could wish”): The verb is a voluntative imperfect, that which expresses a wish or desire, in this case, one that is theologically impossible.

³ See Lev. 27:28, 29; Dt. 7:26; 13:16; Joshua 6:17-18; 7:1ff.

⁴ Piper, *Justification*, 45. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, in *Baker Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), en loc, also agrees. All quotes or allusions to Schreiner’s commentary in this chapter come from his manuscript prior to the publication of his commentary—a manuscript used in a doctoral class I was in that he taught.

of individual election unto salvation later in the chapter, but rather to a corporate election of Israel that does not deal with individual salvation.⁵ Many Molinists would understand Romans 9 in this manner, in part, so that it does not conflict with their model for divine sovereignty and human freedom. For an even more detailed response to those who believe Paul is dealing with corporate election and not individual, see Appendix Three.

God's Word Has Not Failed

In verses 6-13 Paul shows that Israel's widespread rejection of Jesus as the Christ does not show that God's Word has failed. In 9:6a he states his thesis: "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." Then in verses 6b-13 he provides the proof that his Word has not failed, verse 6b stating the proof, namely, that not all who are physical Israelites belong to the spiritual or believing Israel: "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."

As Paul further explains the proof through verse 13, here are his main points:

- In verse 7 we discover that not all Israelites were children of God, that is believing children of Abraham and recipients of the covenant promises simply because they were physical descendants of Abraham. After all, the number was already narrowed in Genesis 21:12 to Isaac and his descendants. This verse reads: "and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'"
- In verse 8 we find out that merely the physical descendants of Abraham are not the ones credited by God as true heirs of Abraham, but rather those who are such children by God's promissory sovereign grace: "This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."
- In verse 9 Paul explains what it means to be a "child of promise" (v. 8) and this is learned from Genesis 18:10, 14. In the same manner Isaac came about by supernatural means, divinely initiated, so also those who are true children of the promise must be brought

⁵ In other words, some believe that this chapter addresses only Israel's role in the history of salvation. John Piper, *Five Points: Toward A Deeper Experience Of God's Grace* (Fern, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2013), 54-55, rightly argues that when we grasp what Paul is struggling with in the first five verses, it clearly deals with salvation. What is more, this is highlighted when Paul begins to provide his answer or argumentation in v. 6. That not all who descended from Israel truly belong to Israel, speaks of some truly knowing God in a saving way and some not—and so locates the discussion in salvation and not merely the historical role of Israel.

about by supernatural and divinely-initiated means—thus implying there was a supernatural, divinely-initiated remnant (Jew and Gentile: Rom. 2:28-29; Eph. 2:11-22; Gal. 3:29) part of and carrying out the promises of God. Verse 9 reads: “For this is what the promise said: ‘About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.’”

- In verses 10-13 we discover the same divine initiative continued to the next generation of the Patriarchs. Here the divine initiative and calling are made even more apparent: “And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹² she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’¹³ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”⁶

God’s Eternal Purpose Displayed In How He Saves

Because of its importance to this whole passage and our current subject, we need to look more closely at verse 11. Here Paul unveils the purpose for which God chose the younger brother (Jacob) over the older brother (Esau) before birth and before their actions could demonstrate their spiritual condition: “...in order that the purpose of God according to election might remain....” (author’s own translation) The presence of the conjunction *hina* (“in order that”) identifies this as a purpose clause, showing the end for which God worked in this fashion. The subject of the clause is *prosthesis* (“purpose”), a term that speaks of the “decrees of God,” i.e. the ultimate goal that God has for all world events and all creatures that they bring glory to him.⁷

⁶ In verse 10 we learn the case of the birth of Jacob and Esau to Isaac and Rebecca also proves divine initiative in the history of Israel and thus that the number is narrowed down and God has not lost control. Verses 11-12 show how divine initiative is behind the birth of Jacob and Esau.

The quote of Mal. 1:2-3 in v. 13 most likely is affirming God loved Esau less than Jacob and so there was a difference in the love toward the two. (See Gen. 29:31; Judges 15:2; 2 Sam. 19:6; Mt. 10:37; Lk. 14:26 for this use of “hate” language) Though God loves all in some sense (cf. Mt. 5:43-45), he nevertheless has an electing, effective love for those whom he saves, as is seen here in Rom. 9:13.

⁷ That God’s ultimate purpose for all world events and creatures is his own glory is communicated throughout Romans. It is seen in the bookends of the epistle and what the purpose of missions-produced, faith-fueled obedience is—it is for the sake of his name (1:5), that glory might go to him (16:25-27). It is seen in statements defining what sin is, i.e. not glorifying God (1:21-23; 3:23). It is present when Paul speaks of all things being “to him” and so “to him be glory forever” (11:36). It is seen as the end of ethical injunctions (15:7). And, what is more, in the near context, here in chapter 9, God’s glory is the end of his sovereign grace in salvation.

The word *prosthesis* (“purpose”) appears to be a technical term for the decrees of God in Paul. See Rom. 8:28.

In regard to salvation, this means God orders salvation such that predestination and election (Rom. 9:11; Eph. 1:11), effective calling (Rom. 8:28; 2 Tim. 1:9), and even the preaching of the gospel (Eph. 3:10) are all done in such a way that they carry out this purpose and because of this purpose. God is shown to be the one who accomplished salvation, not man, God receives the glory and not man.

What Paul appears to be saying is that God worked in this manner so that his divine decrees, which are in accordance with or correspond to election, might remain. In other words, God's divine decrees and more specifically his purpose behind those decrees can be seen by looking at his sovereign action of election. The fact that he elects according to divine initiative and prior to practice or good or evil helps one consider why he works in the way his does (his purpose).

At the end of verse 11 Paul spells out that purpose clearly: "not because of works but because of his call." The first phrase ("not because of works")⁸ shows that works (and for Paul in Romans

⁸ *ouk ex ergōn* (lit. "not out of works"): This is the negated ablative of source. Piper, *Justification*, 52, rightly argues: "With the use of the preposition (*ex*) Paul makes explicit that God's decision to treat Esau and Jacob differently is not merely prior to their good or evil deeds, but is also completely independent of them. God's electing purpose (9:11c) and his concrete prediction (12c) are in no way based on the distinctive Esau and Jacob have by birth or action."

William Lane Craig ("Calvinism Vs. Molinism," *JBTM*, 11, 1 [Spring '14]: 72) argues that faith would never be included in works since it is presented as opposing works in Pauline theology. However, faith does not have to be a work for Paul, by implication, to include it in that complex of events that are connected to works. This is evident from his thought flow in this epistle. First, here in the immediate context, we must not miss that the example of Jacob and Esau is used as an example for how God elects individuals unto salvation (his subject throughout this chapter). So, what Paul says in the epistle about the relation of saving faith and works illuminates what he is writing here. Elsewhere in the epistle we discover that obedience (which is behind good works) emerges from saving faith (1:5; 16:26). What is more, faith is necessary for one to call upon the Lord and to be saved (10:13-17), and the transformation that comes with salvation is what leads one to do works, to obey God (Romans 6:1-23). Most likely, then, when Paul writes in Romans 8:8 that the person who does not have the Spirit and does not belong to Christ "cannot please God," he implies such a person is morally unable to exercise the saving faith that stands behind a person obeying God, which would agree with what the author of Hebrews says: "without faith it is impossible to please God" (11:6). Finally, that God will judge humans by their works that display whether or not they have exercised saving faith in Christ or not (compare 2:6-10 with 3:26), also demonstrates that faith is part of the complex of actions Paul would include in the "works" that were not the cause of God's choosing. Craig is right that there is a way that faith and works (i.e. the works of seeking to earn salvation on self-merit) are opposed in Pauline theology. However, genuine faith and faith-produced good works are not opposite. Finally, that works here would encompass faith in all that Paul is implying is also confirmed in the near context. In Romans 9:16 Paul makes clear that God's election unto salvation does not depend upon human will, which would include faith. It should be noted that "not because of works but because of his call" appears in v. 11 in English and v. 12 in the Greek text.

this would also imply saving faith, for the former emerges from the latter) are in no way the reason behind why God chooses a person. This phrase enlarges upon the clause, “had done nothing either good or bad.”⁹ So, God’s choice of the younger over the older was independent of such events or actions on their part.

If I am correct in the analysis of this text, this not only strikes a strong blow against Molinism, but also provides evidence for the view of absolute sovereignty and meticulous providence set forth in this book, namely that God’s eternal purpose, along with the creatures and their actions that emerge from this purpose, are not limited by or dependent upon human free choices.

The next phrase, introduced by the adversative *alla* (“but”), shows what the reason or source was behind the divine choice: “because of the one who calls” (author’s own translation).¹⁰ The one who calls is God as evidenced in the fact that he determines such calling (v. 7), he is clearly the subject of v. 13, and he is the one who calls according to Paul elsewhere (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:9). Here we discover “the positive affirmation that the true ground of election is God himself...”¹¹ This is a clear statement that election is unconditional. It also should not be missed that if this verse has been explained accurately, then the system of Molinism is untenable.

To summarize, what Paul writes in verses 11-12 is that God worked the way he did in regard to Jacob and Esau (choosing before and independent of birth as well as the practice of good or

⁹ This clause also confirms our assessment that Paul would have saving faith in mind as he talks about the complex of events that God did not have in mind in choosing Jacob over Esau and ultimately in his choice of anyone unto salvation. His choice is, in no way, dependent upon, limited by, or caused by his knowledge (simple foreknowledge or middle knowledge) of their works or the faith that leads to such works.

¹⁰ *ek tou kalountos* (Lit. “out of the one who calls”). It should also be noted that the context demands this calling is effective. In other words, it accomplishes its stated purpose of bringing one to saving faith; that is, their embracing Jesus Christ freely offered in the gospel.

¹¹ Piper, *Justification*, 52.

evil) to demonstrate a timeless principle (which is shown by the use of *menē*: “continue,” and the present participle *ek tou kalountos*: Lit. “out of the one who calls” —both show that this is how God always works): Namely that God’s purpose in what he decrees is to show that what takes place does not in any way depend ultimately upon the course or causation of man’s works (or even God’s knowledge of such works—including knowledge of faith), but it ultimately depends upon and finds its source in God, who calls. As such, he alone receives the glory.¹²

God Is Not Unjust

That we have understood Paul accurately thus far in chapter 9 is confirmed by the direction his argument goes next. He knows from experience that many, upon hearing what he has just written, will conclude this is unjust. I say this has a ring of confirmation in it since it is exactly the manner in which many reply to such doctrines today. If it were merely a matter of corporate election (Israel’s place in God’s salvation plan), it is doubtful Paul would go the direction he does. What is his direction? In verses 14-23 Paul answers such objectors. Here is his thought flow:

- Paul starts out in verse 14 by asking the question he knows many would ask and then he answers it: “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!”¹³
- In verse 15 he quotes Exodus 33:19, thus showing that sovereign grace and justice are not incompatible: “For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”¹⁴

¹² In response to those advocating corporate election and who suggest that Calvinists are reading into these texts modern categories, Piper, *Justification*, 71-72, writes: “Paul stands within a tradition of predestination rooted in Old Testament teachings (cf. Is. 45:5-7; Gen. 21:12; 18:10, 14; Mal. 1:2; Ex. 33:19; 9:16; Is. 29:16; 45:9; Jer. 18:6], which developed through Sirach (33:7-15) to its most radical form embracing individuals and salvation in Qumran (1 ZS 3:15-4:26; 11:10f.) which offers the closest analogies to Paul’s own statements.”

¹³ Paul’s answer to this question is an answer he likes to give to questions he knows many will ask, but they have an absurdity to them based upon who God is and how he works (e.g. Rom. 6:1). The sense is that it is impossible, unthinkable! The clause is: *mē genoito*.

¹⁴ Since we know that New Testament authors often quote Old Testament passages and intend that the contextual ideas of those Old Testament passages stand behind the quotes (and so in this case, the ideas surrounding the Exodus

- Paul makes it clear that justification and covenant blessings are not ultimately dependent upon a person's decision, nor upon the working of the person, but rather God's mercy (v. 16): "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."¹⁵
- In verse 17 Paul cites an Old Testament example, that of the Egyptian Pharaoh in the exodus (see Exodus 9:16), to show that the way God works is with absolute unconditional sovereignty and that the purpose of his work is his own glorification: "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." (See my treatment of the pre-plague, plague, and exodus narratives in Chapter Two)
- Using language out of the exodus narrative of the Pharaoh, Paul draws a conclusion in verse 18, that God is absolutely sovereign in predestination: "So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."
- Yet, Paul knows from experience that many will still think this way of working on the part of God is unjust since it seems to leave man in a state of not being responsible for his actions—especially in the face of God's eternal purpose that cannot be thwarted. So, the apostle answers that object (19-24):

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory –²⁴even us whom he called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

33:19 quote [see my treatment of this passage above in Chapter Two]), this gives all the more credibility to this passage summarizing and saying in a focused manner what we have been arguing—namely that the triune communicating God has created and ordered his creation in such a way as to communicate who he is, that is, to put his attributes on display. Put another way, it supports my contention that Paul has the same line-of-reasoning in mind here in this text. Paul is most likely not just saying divine sovereign grace and justice are not incompatible, but they both necessarily are part of who God is and so must be revealed in how he works. For the reality that context often is intended to stand behind Old Testament quotes and allusions see G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, ed's. *Commentary On the New Testament use Of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, 3rd printing).

¹⁵ This thought seems to be important because justice is not about every man having the ability in himself to decide for salvation and, as such, every man being given a full and equitable chance (and so this is what justice is). Part of the implication appears to be that every man, left to himself, will choose a life leading to perdition. As such, justice alone would see everyone go to hell. So, again, God's sovereign choice in predestination does not fall short of justice. God decrees to save through judgment (pouring out his wrath upon his Son) and he dispenses mercy to every sinner saved, rather than mere justice. So, in his mercy to sinners, justice is shown (in the Son) and in his judgment of sinners (they receive what they have chosen).

An Analysis Of Romans 9:22-23 And Its Immediate Context

Since this paragraph includes the key text that most clearly summarizes our main point of Chapters 2-3 (see verses 22-23), we want to examine it with some detail. In verse 19 Paul reveals the question some will still ask, even after his extensive argumentation to this point, “How can God hold man responsible—since he cannot resist what God has decreed?” (a paraphrase) I take this to mean that since outcomes are determined by God and so man cannot make a choice that is other than what God has decided, many will conclude this is unjust!

It is important to note that based upon either the Molinist or the Calvinist position, this objection would stand, since in both the outcome is decided infallibly.¹⁶ Of course, if we are correct in our exposition of the rest of this chapter, Paul is dealing with objections to what we would now term a Calvinist outlook—one in which God, for his own glory ultimately and apart from simple foreknowledge or middle knowledge (of man’s faith and works), decrees what he does.

Once Paul launches into the actual response to this opposition, it is noteworthy what Paul does not do. He does not say, “O, well, you misunderstand. Man really does have indeterministic freedom and can choose other than what God decrees, so God cannot infallibly know the free future actions of man” Nor does he commence with a detailed philosophical argument explaining how man is free in spite of God’s providence (i.e. that it is logically possible for man to choose other than what is actualized). And he certainly does not offer a response that includes anything

¹⁶ Though Paul is not dealing with a Molinist scheme at this point, nevertheless, the objection could still follow in that model—at least some versions of it. After all, since it is plausible at least in some cases, that for many persons who do not choose God, that God could have chosen to create a world other than he did that would have included the persons choosing Christ, then those individual still could in a similar fashion say, “God why am I held responsible?”

It is also worth noting that in Paul’s stated opposition of the opponent, what is being argued is, in modern terminology, I can’t be held responsible since I do not possess indeterministic freedom!

sounding like this: “Well, because man is contra-causally free, then God must....” Or, “Since true love cannot include even soft determinism, then what I really mean here is this....”

What Paul does is the following (20-23):

- In 20a he states that a human being is unqualified to answer back to God in such a way as to think they can show God that he is wrong, needs correcting, and should change his ways.
- In 20b he explains that mankind stands in the same relationship to God as a clay pot does to the potter. The pot cannot ask the potter why did you make me thus with the implication that he was wrong. Neither can we ask, with accusation, such a question of God in regard to us. The implication seems to be that we are not in the place of God and so cannot fully comprehend God, why he does what he does, and whether or not his eternal decrees are just.¹⁷
- In verses 21-23 Paul provides the twofold reason that such an accusing question is inappropriate. To begin, Paul writes that God, as God (the potter), has authority to do as he pleases with those whom he creates—creating out of the same lump of humanity, vessels for honor and vessels for dishonor (21). But even more, in verses 22-23 we discover that God’s distinguishing, sovereign plan serves the ultimate purpose of his glorification. In other words, he creates and endures with much patience persons who have been created for wrath and prepared for perdition—all because he wills to show his wrath and judging power upon them. At the same time, such also makes known with greater brilliance the fuller and more treasure-like character of his glory as he deals with the elect, those prepared for mercy and those prepared beforehand (predestined) for ultimate glory. Such forms a necessary contrast that God’s glorious mercy might be that much more appreciated by the elect among mankind (and most likely elect angels) and thus a motivation for glorifying God even more. God exercises justice toward those not saved (those passed over) and mercy toward the elect in such a way as to highlight that he is not only a just God, but even more that he is a God of mercy.

Zeroing in on verses 22-23, Schreiner (*Romans*, en loc.) is correct when he argues that the Greek particle (*de*) is not adversative, but continuative. There is no evidence at all that God is being contrasted with the potter. Instead, what the apostle seems to be doing is developing the thought of verse 21 more specifically. There, Paul argued that, as the potter/creator, God has the

¹⁷ Here, Paul utilizes the same picture Isaiah (64:8) and Jeremiah (18:6) utilize. The frequent Old Testament quotes and allusions throughout this teaching of Romans 9 remind us the apostle believes his conclusions stand upon solid biblical precedent.

authority to do as he desires with the clay. Now, in these two verses Paul tells the reader what God desires to do. As Paul accomplishes this, he also offers a second reason that such an accusing question as found in verse 20 is inappropriate. Namely, it fails to take into consideration God's sovereign purpose in both the predestination and reprobation of election. The function of these verses is this: "In vv. 22-23 he lifts the veil and provides an explanation for why God has prepared some for destruction and others for life. The awesomeness of the subject indicates that these verses are among the most important in all of Pauline literature."¹⁸

The question which Paul offers here is designed to assert the very content of the question. In other words, when he asks, "What if God...?" he is saying that this is exactly what God has done.¹⁹ Paul is refuting and answering the assertion of the opponent who is suggesting that God is somehow unjust to make a person for the purpose that he does. Paul is asserting in these verses that God has very good purposes.

What does Paul assert in this question? First, Paul tells us the reason why God has carried out the action of these two verses. This is seen in the causal participle "desiring" (present progressive from *thelō*).²⁰ In other words, God has done this because he desired to do it or he willed it (i.e. his decretive will).

¹⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, en loc.

¹⁹ This is a figure of speech known as erotesis. We find another example in Luke 14:5. An analogy can help illustrate this figure of speech. Let's say that John is in the penitentiary and his pastor comes to visit him a couple months before his release. John asserts to his pastor that he does not believe that his wife, Mary, will continue to love him and still be faithful to him and want him to return home. Then the pastor responds: "John, what if I were to tell you that Mary is in the process of cleaning your house and planning a big coming-home party for you and has been telling everyone that she can't wait until you are back?" What the pastor has just done is to use erotesis in which he asserts the very content of the question. John would understand this question to be a refutation of and an answer to his previous assertion. The same is taking place with Paul here.

²⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, en loc.; Piper, *Justification*, 205-7. Piper calls attention to verse 17 as a parallel that confirms the causal use of the participle.

What it is specifically that God has decreed is “to show his wrath and make known his power.” Primarily here, because it is coupled with “wrath” (*orgē*) and because it is opposed to the action in verse 23 of God making known the riches of his glory, “power” (*dunaton*) is primarily God’s power shown in judgment. Motivated by the sure and effective desire to demonstrate his wrath (God’s righteous anger toward sin) and his power, what God has done is “endured²¹...vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” Because of the idea of creation implied in verse 21 (in “to make” [*poiēsai*]), what the full thought here in verse 22 seems to be is that because God desired to show forth to the world his wrath and power, he has brought into existence not only those who are sinners and would sin, but those also who would be allowed to remain in their rebellion and never trust him (even though their continued sin and rebellion are reprehensible to him).

God not only creates and puts up with such ones, but he does this “with much patience.” With a great amount of patience, because he is a God of patience (Neh. 9:7-37; Nah. 1:3; Rom. 2:4), he puts up with and endures those who rebel against him and are his enemies (cf. Rom. 5:10). Such patience and kindness can serve to bring them to repentance (Rom. 2:4), but in this case, not effectively. “The implication is that it would have been just and righteous for him to destroy them immediately (cf. Rom. 3:25-26).”²² God is not patient because he is waiting for them to repent. Like with Pharaoh, the waiting, the patience, even further magnifies his mercy

²¹ This is a 2nd aorist, active, indicative, 3rd person, singular, from *pherō*. The ESV, NKJV, NASB, RSV, AV all have “endured.” The NIV translates it “bore.” BAGD, 855, cites this verse as meaning “bear patiently, endure, put up with.” Paul only uses the verb one other time (2 Timothy 4:13), where it means “bring.” Hebrews 13:13 speaks of our bearing or enduring the reproach which can come because of Jesus. The verb denotes enduring something unpleasant to the subject.

²² Schreiner, *Romans*, en loc.

and glory. “God defers his immediate judgment of vessels of wrath so that he can unveil the full extent of his power and wrath on those who continually resisted his offer of repentance....”²³

Specifically what God endures with much patience is “vessels (*skeuē*) of wrath (*orgē*).”²⁴ The word “vessels” elsewhere denotes dishes, bowls, and utensils (cf. 2 Timothy 2:20-21 [cf. GNT; NLT]). It is used figuratively here similarly—speaking of what a potter makes (cf. v. 20-21). The point seems to be that just like potters create dishes, bowls, and utensils for different purposes, so God brings into existence individuals for different ultimate, penultimate, and antepenultimate purposes. It is taking the analogy too far to say such “vessels” are not in any way valuable to God as being made in his image (cf. Gen. 6:9; Ps. 8:5-6; James 3:9);²⁵ nor is it accurate to flatten out what happens in this entire process and assume there is only one cause (God), that he gives such persons no chance, or that they do not bear responsibility. Yet, none of these truths are part of Paul’s current focus.

The final clause in verse 22, “prepared for destruction,” further explains the vessels. The word “prepared” is a passive participle (from the verb *katartizō*) and speaks of God’s action upon these vessels, an understanding that fits with the context.²⁶ The last term, “destruction” (*apōleia*), is a technical term for the judgment of hell in the Pauline literature (cf. Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thes. 2:3; 1 Tim. 6:9). This is the only way Paul uses the term. This understanding is also strengthened

²³ Schreiner, *Romans*, en loc. This is attested in Jewish literature (2 Esdr. 7:70-74; 2 Macc. 6:12-14). Piper, *Justification*, 209-10, agrees and defines the “patience” here as “patiently holding back judgment with a view to greater display of wrath and power.” He also adds an example from 1 Macc. 8:1-4.

²⁴ The word “wrath” stands in relation to “vessels” as an objective genitive. In other words, they are vessels who bring forth or display God’s wrath. This is not the sole identity of these persons, but it is the only focus of Paul in this text, given his purpose.

²⁵ Though *skeuē* is singular, it carries a plural idea, as most versions translate it (cf. ESV, NASB, NKJV, RSV, AV).

²⁶ Piper, *Justification*, 211-14, gives an extensive argument in favor of the passive here, with God being the one who is doing the preparing.

by the reality the “destruction” is offset by the antithetical “glory” (*doxa*) in verse 23, a term which encompasses all the eschatological blessing for the believer.

The inescapable logic of verse 22 is that God decreed that he would bring into existence people who would sin and also would not trust in him and would not repent of that sin unto salvation, and this is so for the purpose of displaying his wrath and power in judgment.²⁷

What a reader cannot do at this point is conclude there is no material elsewhere in Scripture that addresses man’s responsibility, freedom, and how this intersects with such a strong view of God’s free, absolute sovereignty that is displayed in salvation. In fact, in this same epistle, Paul makes it clear that no lost human can stand before God and say that he did not have a genuine opportunity for salvation and so should not be judged (1:19-20); that God has displayed acts of kindness that are sufficient to bring humans to repentance (2:4); that all, without distinction, can call upon the Lord for salvation (10:13); and in relation to Israel in particular, God has given them ample opportunity to respond to the gospel, even though most have not (10:18-21). What is more, Paul also affirms that humans are morally unable, due to sin, to respond to God and his saving good news (1:16; 3:10-18; 8:8), and so need an effective work accompanying the proclamation of the gospel so that people can trust in Christ and be saved (1:16; 6:1-23; 8:28-30; 10:14-17), and Paul believes God will carry out this effective work among many—all kinds of people from the nations so they trust in Christ, obey God, and glorify the Savior (1:5; 16:26).

So, in this very epistle, Paul has much to say about responsibility of humans and how he works through means and agents. For example, if people don’t go and preach, then people will not trust in Christ as Savior, and if people do go, many will trust and be saved (Romans 10:13-17)! Yet, Paul is also clear here in the ninth chapter of the epistle that God is sovereign in an absolute and free sense that leaves no room for his decrees to be limited by or dependent upon

²⁷ So also Schreiner, *en loc.*

human choice. And, he is equally clear that God decreed to bring into existence people who would not only be sinners and sin, but who would reject his revelation of himself and would never trust in him—and that this was, in part, to display the fullness of his glory in his manifold attributes—which includes his wrath and hatred against sin.

Yet, this was not the ultimate purpose for which God has carried out his works of creation and providence in the way he has. For that we must turn to verse 23.

The *kai* at the beginning of verse 23 is best translated “even.”²⁸ We know this because the next clause shows purpose, but the last clause in verse 22 does not, so “and” does not fit. Why did God decree not only to permit people to sin, but also that some people would reject him and thus face judgment (v. 22)? Here in verse 23 is a more ultimate answer: “In order to (*hina*) make known the riches of his glory.”

More specifically, what does God mean by “riches” (*ton plouton*)? The term, though singular, is often translated as a plural and in Romans is used figuratively multiple times, in conjunction with God’s goodness (2:4), his glory (here), salvation blessings (11:12), and wisdom and knowledge of God (11:33). Paul often uses the term to denote “fullness of goods,”²⁹ i.e., the full weight and value, the fullness of that which it describes—usually something of great value. So, here in Romans 9:23 it appears that what God wants to make known is not merely his glory, but he also wants to show the full, rich, treasure-like nature of his glory. In other words, God has ordained the world that he did so that sentient beings may fully value his glory as displayed in his salvation of sinners—especially as seen in contrast with the heinous nature of sin, the

²⁸ Some versions translate it “and” (KJV; NKJV; GNT; HCSB) and some do not translate it (ESV; RSV; NIV; NLT). However, with their opening clauses of the verse, both the NLT (“He does this”) and NIV (“What if he did this”) appear to understand the verse functioning as I do.

²⁹ Hauck, Kasch, TDNT, 6, 328.

continued stubbornness and rebellion of sinners, and in contrast with the judgment that comes upon those persons.

Next, in the phrase, “for vessels of mercy” (*epi skeuē eleous*), the counterpart to “vessels of wrath” in v. 22, we see more specifically how this glory will be fully appreciated. These are persons who have been created and in relation to whom God has governed their life in a way that he can display his mercy, i.e. his deserved favor to those in agony, to bring them out of their plight, and to give eschatological life.³⁰ The thought flow of verses 22-23 is this: God has ordained a world that includes sinful humans—some of whom will never trust in him and so will face his wrathful judgment—and has done this for the more ultimate purpose that he might make known more clearly or with greater force how valuable his glory is as he shows forth mercy upon those “which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (which are further described in verse 24 as “even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles”), and this is accomplished as God’s mercy is seen in light of sin and the judgment deserved by sinners (v. 22).

The final clause of verse 23, “which he prepared beforehand for glory,” not only further explains “vessels of mercy,” but also serves to clarify that what Paul is dealing with in these two verses is the subject of the decrees of God, that is, his eternal purpose. The verb translated “prepared beforehand” (*proetoimazō*), is used only one other time in the New Testament, Ephesians 2:10, where it speaks of the good works that God “prepared beforehand” that we should walk in them. It “signifies God’s predestining work.”³¹ Here, the direct object of the verb, “which” (whose antecedent is “vessels of mercy”) communicates that even before God brought

³⁰ The first part of this definition comes from how the word is normally used elsewhere. For the last part I am dependent upon Schreiner, *Romans*, en loc.

³¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, en loc.

these vessels into existence he prepared them for the ultimate purpose of displaying his full glory contrasted with his wrathful judgment. Behind Paul's thought flow appears to be the same idea that we see in Revelation 4:11—namely, that in eternity past, at that logical moment when God decreed to bring these “vessels of mercy” into existence and to save them, it was as certain as if they had already existed and been saved.

Daniel Fuller has written the following about these verses and the reality that what Paul is affirming is that the glory of God's mercy is seen in its fullest sense and valued to its fullest only against the contrast with sin and wrath:

But He has a greater purpose than simply to show the full range of His glory, for He would not be showing Himself as He really is if He set forth His wrath and power as coordinate and equal to His love and mercy. God delights far more in His mercy than in His wrath. So, in order to show the priority of His mercy, He must place it against the backdrop of wrath. How could mercy appear fully as His great mercy unless it was extended to people who were under His wrath and therefore could only ask for mercy? It would be impossible for them to share with God the delight He has in His mercy unless they saw clearly the awfulness of the almighty wrath from which His mercy delivers them.³²

That the mercy of God's glory is valued more against the backdrop of his wrathful judgment and sin, a point Paul is making here, has been long understood. The Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, puts it this way:

Distinguishing mercy affects more than any mercy. If Pharaoh had passed as safely as Israel, the Red Sea would have been less remembered. If the rest of the world had not been drowned, and the rest of Sodom and Gomorrah not burned, the saving of Noah had been no wonder, nor Lot's deliverance so much talked of. When one is enlightened, and another left in darkness; one reformed, and another by his lust enslaved; it makes the saints cry out, “Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world?” When the prophet is sent to one widow only of all that were in Israel, and to cleanse one Naaman of all the lepers, the mercy is more observable. That will surely be a day of passionate sense on both sides, when there shall be two in one bed, and two in the field, the one taken and the other left. The saints shall look down upon the burning lake, and in the sense of their own happiness, and in the approbation of God's just

³² Daniel Fuller, *The Unity Of The Bible: Unfolding God's Plan For Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 445-48, cited in Piper, *Justification*, 215-16. Schreiner, *Romans*, en loc, agrees.

proceedings, they shall rejoice and sing, "Thou are righteous, O Lord! Who wast, art, and shalt be, because thou has judged thus."³³

Conclusions From The Analysis

There are a number of conclusions we can draw from this lengthy discussion of God's purposes in creation and providence, as well as what they reveal about him.

To begin, though we cannot explain fully why God created and has ordered the world in the manner he has, we can at least say that it is so that he can put on display the full breadth of his manifold attributes and especially to highlight with greater intensity that he is a good God, a God of love, grace, mercy, and a God who saves the lost. And this love and mercy of God could not be appreciated to its fullest and seen with its greatest brilliance apart from viewing it in light of the plight and wrath from which one is saved.

Next, given this ultimate purpose of God and what it says about how he has ordered the world as an absolutely free God who is not limited by human decisions, it appears that the notion of indeterministic freedom and the model of Molinistic middle knowledge is untenable. This assessment will be supported further in the remaining chapters.

What is more, though Molinism can be applauded for attempting to explain how God is both sovereign (and this including a stout view of God's providence) and man is still responsible for his actions, too many key biblical teachings about God's purpose and what he is like are lost in this approach. More to the point, as Paul speaks of God's purposes for his works of creation and providence here in Romans 9, he focuses on the absolutely free God creating such that he puts on display a fullness of his manifold attributes—and this in a way that his glorious mercy is valued more highly contrasted with his wrathful judgment—rather than creating for his glory in a manner that preserves indeterministic human freedom so that the love that humans offers is

³³ Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* (n.a.), 32-33.

genuine.³⁴ As will be discovered in subsequent chapters, God has so ordered the world and human events such that human sin and rebellion are highlighted—while showing that all who are lost have no one to blame, but their own rebellious selves—and that his grace in initial, progressive, and ultimate sanctification is decisive. In other words, the Christian trusts in Christ, grows in Christ, and eventually will be glorified so that he walks in perfect obedience for eternity all by the decisive saving and transforming undeserved favor of God. At the very least, some of these truths are blunted, if not altogether lost, in any system that seeks to preserve indeterministic human freedom and that makes God’s sovereign works of providence dependent upon and limited by such human freedom.

Finally, though I believe more can be explained about the relation of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility than often is put forth by those who quickly jump to “mystery” as their conclusion of the whole matter, nevertheless, Paul does leave room for mystery to be part of the answer. As we have seen in this and the previous chapter, the Bible reveals that God, stemming from his nature as a holy, sin-hating and wrathful, glorious, loving, merciful, good, and eternally communicating God, has brought forth the world as it is—that it might display in the fullest manner his manifold attributes, with the result that his glorious mercy in salvation is valued to its fullest extent among sentient beings. We have seen that this includes not only bringing into existence a world full of humans who are permitted to sin, but some who are permitted to sin and remain rebelliously opposed to God, and so will face his wrath. This also includes God’s decree that this world goes on a significantly long time until the Second Coming of Christ in its broken,

³⁴ If my soft deterministic explanation of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are consistent with biblical teaching, there is no problem attributing genuine love to the human for God. For God so works in the heart of such a person that even though they started out as an enemy of God (Rom. 5:10), they come to love him truly and freely (in the biblical sense) from their own heart (cf. Rom. 8:28 [also Luke 7:47, 50; 1 Cor. 8:3; James 1:12]).

unredeemed state, with all the pain that goes along with this. All of this magnifies the glory of God's manifold attributes in a manner that does not negate human responsibility.

Yet, we are still left with mystery. As God carries out his decrees, why does he choose Smith for salvation and not Jones? If I am correct in my analysis of Scripture, we cannot say that God was limited by or dependent upon their contra-causal choices. But, as Paul implies in this passage, mystery remains at this point. But, God does it in a way that does not violate his attributes. So, he remains holy, righteous, and good.