

“Is God Unjust? Not At All”

Sermons on Romans # 25

Texts: Romans 9:6-29; Malachi 1:1-3

Romans 9:6-29 includes one of the most controversial topics in all of Christian theology, the question of God’s sovereignty in relation to the election of certain individuals unto salvation and of others unto damnation. Paul does not raise the subject of election to give people something interesting to speculate about, but to answer the difficult questions raised earlier in this chapter. If the gospel goes first to the Jew and only then to the Gentile, why is it that Israel presently stands under God’s curse? Does God keep his promises? Did God reject his people? Or is Israel’s present state of unbelief a part of God’s larger redemptive-historical purposes in bringing salvation to the Gentiles? Thus Paul introduces the subject of God’s sovereign purpose in election as the means of answering these difficult questions.

In Romans 8:28-30, Paul made the point that human salvation begins and ends with God. He must now explain why Israel’s role in redemptive history has taken such a surprising turn, especially in light of the nation’s predicament, having fallen under the covenant curse. How is it that Israel was heir to the blessings listed in Romans 9:1-5, but has not yet received them when ungodly Gentiles have? As we saw last time, Paul’s answer to these questions hinges upon an important distinction he makes between two groups within Israel (“true Israel” and “national Israel”). In Romans 9:6, Paul writes, *“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.”* The fact that Israel is presently under God’s curse is not due to the failure of God’s word, which cannot fail. According to Paul, there is a narrow group in view (“not all Israel”) and a broader group (“all Israel”). “All Israel” refers to national Israel when emphasizing the national promises, or ethnic Israel when speaking of the people (the Jews). The promises described in Romans 9:1-5 have been made to the broader group, those Jews who have mistakenly sought to attain the promises through good works and/or ethnic descent, bringing them under God’s curse. The narrower group, “not all Israel,” (true Israel or spiritual Israel) is composed of those presently in possession of the blessings promised to God’s people under the Abrahamic covenant. These are the true descendants of Abraham from among the broader group. God’s word has not failed even though the broader group (national Israel) is under God’s curse. The narrow group (true Israel) have received the promise exactly as God had promised.

In Romans 9:7-13, Paul seeks to answer the question regarding national Israel’s rejection of the promise by introducing into his discussion the mystery of election and God’s sovereign purposes.

There are a number of redemptive-historical and theological points which need to be addressed. In verse 7, Paul reminds the Jews that citizenship in true Israel must be defined in light of the promise God made to Abraham, not in relationship to the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Says Paul, *“Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’”* Just because certain Jews can trace their ancestry back to Abraham, such does not mean they are Abraham’s descendants in the sense of being heirs to the promise. Individual Jews are members of true Israel (the narrower group) only if they believe the promise—not because they are circumcised, keep the dietary laws, feast days, or demonstrate an external righteousness. Although both Isaac and Ishmael were Abraham’s natural sons, the promise was reckoned through Isaac, which explains why Paul quotes Genesis 21:12 to make his point.

But since all Jews agreed with this point, Paul adds the following point to his argument in verse 8: “*it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.*” The children of the promise (God’s children—a clear reference to true Israel) are those reckoned as righteous through faith, not those who are only Jews by birth and by custom. In the words of one writer, “what counts is grace, not race.”¹ The scope of this promise is clearly framed in verse 8: the object of the promise (the promised seed) will not come through Hagar, but through Sarah.

In verses 10-13, Paul skips a generation moving from Isaac/Ishmael to Jacob/Esau and makes three basic points which bolster the fact that the promise comes through faith. That God chose one son (Jacob) over another (Esau) even though both boys were twins and had the same mother and father refutes the idea that the promise is extended to all of Abraham’s descendants by bloodline. “*Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac*” (v. 10). The promise is a gracious one. The reason why God chooses Jacob over Esau has to do with God’s sovereign purposes, not because of something good in either twin. “*Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad -- in order that God’s purpose in election might stand*” (v. 11). What about Jacob’s behavior according to the biblical account? God’s choice is not based upon foreseen faith (cf. Romans 8:28-29), but is according to his purpose. The fact that Jacob, the younger of the two twins, becomes preeminent in redemptive-history is cited as an illustration that God works his will according to his purposes in ways which often transcend human understanding. “*The older will serve the younger*” (v. 12). God does not act arbitrarily, but according to his redemptive-historical purposes, which he may or may not reveal to us.

But the most startling statement made by Paul comes in verse 13: “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*” Paul cites from Malachi 1:2-3 to explain what lies at the root of the points stated in the previous verses. Jacob has received the three-fold preeminence because God loved him. Esau did not receive these things because God hated him. This gets right to the heart of the critical question, “why do some receive God’s blessing (salvation) while some receive his curse (damnation)?” The reason lies in God’s mysterious purposes in election, and not because of something good or bad God’s foresees within the creature.

To avoid the obvious difficulties that such teaching raises (especially in the American context of egalitarian democracy and optimism about human nature) a number of Christians contend that when Paul speaks of Jacob and Esau, he is not referencing these two as individuals, but those whom they represent. This is the so-called “corporate election” typical of contemporary Arminianism. In this scheme it is argued that God does not elect specific individuals, only certain categories, in this case, those who believe the promise, i.e., Israel or the church. It is left up to us as to which category, we will be in.

The argument for corporate election is often framed along the lines that throughout the Old Testament these two names can designate people or nations. Jacob’s name was later changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28), while Esau’s name is given to Edom (Genesis 36:8). Furthermore, in Genesis 25:23, we read that “two nations are in [Rebekah’s] womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.” According to some, this means that God’s love is predicated of his people as a whole, Israel, while God’s hatred is predicated of “Esau,” a reference to God’s rejection of the Edomites as a nation.² Thus it is argued that

¹ The words are from N. T. Wright and are cited in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 577.

² Even the usually Reformed-leaning Leon Morris states that “both in Genesis and Malachi the reference is clearly to nations, and we should accept this as Paul’s meaning” (Cf. Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 357).

Paul is not referring to the election of individuals, but to the election of nations to prominent roles in redemptive history.³ Therefore, say the Arminians, Paul is dealing with nations (or categories) and not with specific individuals. We enter these categories by faith, not by God's choice. The problem with the Reformed view, they say, is that it makes God's elective choice completely arbitrary.

There are a number of reasons why the so-called corporate interpretation fails.⁴ When Paul mentions Jacob and Esau, he speaks of them as individuals, mentioning their conception, their birth and their works. This would make no sense if Paul were speaking only of nations and not of individuals. Many of the key terms used by Paul are used elsewhere in reference to the salvation of particular individuals (election: Romans 11:5, 7; calling; Romans 8:28, and not "of works," Romans 4:2-8, 11:6). Furthermore, these terms don't apply easily to nations, "for Paul clearly does not believe that peoples or nations—not even Israel—are chosen and called by God for salvation apart from their works A description here of how God calls nations to participate in the historical manifestation of his salvific acts runs counter to Paul's purpose in this paragraph."⁵ In the Old Testament texts Paul cites, God discriminates not among nations, but among individuals within a single family, and appoints these individuals to specific roles in redemptive history. Paul's point is that God is presently bringing people to faith in the promise, the same way as he did in the days of the patriarchs, by choosing some and rejecting others, leaving them to suffer the consequences of unbelief.⁶ The corporate interpretation misses the point of Paul's argument and is but a thinly veiled attempt to circumvent God's sovereignty.

But what does Paul mean when he speaks of God loving Jacob and hating Esau? According to Douglas Moo, "if God's love of Jacob consists in his choosing Jacob to be the 'seed' who would inherit the blessings promised to Abraham, then God's hatred of Esau is best understood to refer to God's decision not to bestow his blessing on Esau. It might be best translated 'reject.' 'Love' and 'hate' are not here, then, emotions that God feels but actions that he carries out."⁷ Thus God acts according to his sovereign purpose. He does not act arbitrarily. While the details of God's purpose often remain a mystery, this does not negate the obvious, that God is sovereign and acts in accordance with his immutable nature and

³ See the discussion in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 585. According to Robert Shank, in his defense of Arminianism, Elect in the Son, the solution to the supposed paradox between God's sovereignty and a free justification by faith is in "recognizing that the election is corporate rather than particular, that it comprehends all men potentially, that God wills to have all men to be saved and none to perish or fail to come to repentance, and that his gracious gift of saving faith is available to all men who will accept it. . . . Many have failed to recognize that Paul's consideration in Rom. 9:6-29 is the question of the circumstance of Israel, rather than the personal salvation of individual men, and that his argument serves only to affirm that God, as a sovereign creator, is free to order all things as he pleases and to bestow or deny favors as He chooses without becoming answerable to men But this must not be construed to mean that God is not governed by moral principles inherent in His own holy character and that he is at liberty to be arbitrary or capacious" (Shank, Elect in the Son, pp. 114-119).

⁴ The following points come from Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 585-586.

⁵ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 585.

⁶ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 586.

⁷ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 585-586.

decree. God's choice of Jacob over Esau is a reference to specific individuals, even if they later represent nations in redemptive-history. God chose Jacob over Esau without reference to works or foreseen faith. God's love for Jacob is connected with Jacob's reception of the covenant blessings, while God's hatred of Esau is connected to the fact that he did not. Thus we should read the language of love and hate in terms of covenant blessings and curses, not sinful human emotions or passions.

Having broached the very difficult theological subject of election and predestination in the previous section, Paul must now do two things. First, he must answer the apologetic question raised by his insistence that all human salvation begins and ends with God. Is God acting unfairly if he exercises his sovereign authority and chooses one individual while rejecting another? Paul also reminds us that we miss the mark if we take our focus off of the central issue, which is that the source of salvation from the guilt and power of sin is not to be found in the sinner, but in the mercy of God.

Therefore, the issue under debate cannot be understood apart from the category of human sinfulness, which Paul has already established in Romans 1:18-3:20. Ignoring this context is a common mistake when discussing election and predestination. It is not that we have two morally neutral individuals (Jacob and Esau) who both supposedly have an equal chance of entering heaven. The very fact of God's sovereign choice implies that one deserving party is somehow prevented from obtaining something to which they are rightly entitled. But the doctrine of election cannot be seen through the lens of egalitarian democracy. It must be seen through the lens of human sin and guilt before God. The fact is that neither Jacob or Esau deserved anything but judgment from God. It is an act of sheer mercy that God chooses to save one of two individuals who both deserve eternal punishment. It is an act of mercy when God loves Jacob, who, as we know from the biblical record was a schemer and a deceiver. When Paul stresses that this whole subject of God's sovereignty must be understood against the backdrop of human sin and God's mercy, he means that no one *deserves* to be saved, no one *merits* salvation, no one *seeks* salvation, and so *if* any are to be saved, this must be traced to God's mercy, not man's choice or goodness. We must keep this in mind whenever we talk about election and predestination.

Using the familiar series of questions and answers (the so-called "diatribe style"), the questions that Paul raises here and in the following section are hardly theoretical. These are questions, no doubt, the Apostle has heard before.⁸ They are questions being asked in the Roman church and, in part, are Paul's reason for writing. These are questions we still hear today. Paul confronts us with the following message: God is God and we are not! Paul frames the first rhetorical question in verse 14: "*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!*" The opening words are typically Pauline— "*what shall we say?*" and are used to introduce key clarifications in Paul's writings. Paul also uses this approach when preparing a defense against the typical human (and sinful) objections to God's sovereignty. The first issue raised by Paul is the most obvious one: "Is God unjust (*adikia*)?" This must be understood in reference to the previous verses (9:6-13) in which Paul argues that God chose Jacob because he loved him and rejected Esau because he hated him. Does the fact that God does such things render him "unrighteous"? Is there some kind of flaw in God's character which leads him to act favorably to one and unfavorably to another. "Is God being capricious when he chooses Jacob and rejects Esau?"

Paul's answer is the emphatic "*Not at all!*" However we understand the sovereignty of God, we cannot attribute unrighteousness to God in dealing with his creatures. To support this point, Paul appeals to concrete events in redemptive history. Citing from Exodus 33:19, Paul reminds his readers in verse 15 of

⁸ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 589-590.

something of which they were familiar: “*For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”*” If anyone objects to Paul’s comments regarding Jacob and Esau—citations from Genesis and Malachi—what will they do with those Old Testament texts where God speaks of his own freedom to do as he sees fit? The choice of Jacob over Esau is hardly an isolated case! The first passage Paul cites is from the Exodus account in which God declares to Moses that he has the right to exercise mercy and compassion upon those specific individuals (not the nations) whom he wishes. The implication which Paul will make explicit in verses 17-18 is that God has the right to withhold mercy and compassion from other individuals if he so wishes.

The conclusion Paul draws from this is now set forth in verse 16: “*It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.*” Almost anticipating the eventual rise of Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism, Paul’s point is that the reason for God’s sovereign choice of certain individuals lies within him and has nothing to do with his creatures. This assertion, “*It does not depend upon man’s desire or effort*” must be read in light of Romans 3:9-20, namely, that God’s election of certain individuals is not based upon foreseen faith—man’s desire. Furthermore, election is not based upon human good works—man’s effort.⁹ The mystery of election and predestination is resolved only in one place, the mysterious purposes of God, in which he pours out his mercy upon those whom he wills.

In verse 17, Paul continues to list illustrations of God’s sovereignty, now citing the Lord’s own words from Exodus 9:16. Whereas in the previous two verses, Paul dealt with the mercy and compassion of God (the positive side of this), Paul now deals with the flip side, the hardening of specific sinners. “*For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”*” It is clear that in Paul’s way of thinking, God raised up Pharaoh for a very specific role in redemptive history, so that God’s power might be made manifest, and so that God’s name might be proclaimed in all of the earth. Israel’s exodus from Egypt resulted in a number of important redemptive-historical events; the Passover, the crossing of the sea, the giving of the law, the forty-years in the wilderness, and the entrance into the promised land. All of these things are necessary to the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes, and all of them are the direct result of God’s “raising up” of Pharaoh. If you read the Exodus account closely (e.g. Exodus 14:5-8), you will repeatedly discover that God is ordering historical events—including the free acts of Pharaoh—so that God’s eternal purposes are fulfilled. It is for his own purpose that God raised up Pharaoh!

Such a theologically loaded assertion requires an important word of explanation by Paul in verse 18, when he points out that God has every right to do as he wishes with his creatures. “*Therefore God has*

⁹ Romans 9:16 echoes what is said in a number of other New Testament texts. In John 1:12-13, we read, “*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*” This is echoed throughout John’s gospel, especially in a text such as John 11 and the account of Lazarus. This same thing is taught throughout the writings of Paul. See for example, Ephesians 2:1-5: “*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved*” (cf. Colossians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5).

mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” God is absolutely free to be merciful to those whom he wishes. He is equally free to harden those whom he will harden. Whatever we say about this difficult teaching it is clear that the apostle locates the source of humanity’s salvation in the mysterious purposes of God (cf. Romans 8:28; Ephesians 1:11) and not because of anything in sinful creatures. The best thing we can say in response is “let God be God.” God is merciful, and sinful men and women can do nothing to earn or prompt God to be merciful to them.

But what does Paul’s language of hardening actually mean. The verb *skleryno* appears some fourteen times in the LXX account of Exodus chapters 4-14. Anyone familiar with the Greek text of Exodus would have made the connection between Pharaoh’s role in redemptive history and Paul’s argument for God’s freedom. Far from being a reference merely to Pharaoh’s role in history—without any reference to the eternal destiny and actions of the man himself—verses 22-23 speak of God creating certain individuals with the intention of using them as vessels of honor, while at the same time speak of God creating others as vessels prepared for destruction. God’s mercy underlies the one, God’s justice underlies the other. But all of this must be seen against the backdrop of human sinfulness in Romans 1:18-3:20. Is mercy truly mercy if it is defined as a reward for human behavior?

According to one writer, “God’s hardening, then, is an action that renders a person insensitive to God and to his word and that, if not reversed, culminates in eternal damnation.”¹⁰ While some attempt to interpret Paul as saying that God is merely responding to Pharaoh’s prior decision to harden his own heart, such is clearly not the case. In the Exodus account, Pharaoh’s heart is said to be hardened as a consequence of God’s actions, not the other way around. Despite the difficulties this presents, this is a sovereign act of God and reinforces the point we made earlier; that Paul is not speaking of the election of categories or nations, but that God elects or reprobates specific individuals, because he decides to be merciful to some and because he decides to harden others. But we must be very careful here. This is not to say that God has no reason as to why he chooses one and rejects another. Such would lend itself to the charge of arbitrariness. Rather, we should say that God does this according to his own sovereign purpose, a purpose which he does not always choose to reveal to us—although in the case of Pharaoh he does. Indeed, to say that God does this according to his purpose is to refute the charge of arbitrariness while at the same time to acknowledge the element of mystery.

Since we do not know what God’s purposes are until they unfold in history, there are three errors we must avoid. One is that in order to avoid the difficulties this raises, some argue that God’s purpose is external to himself—i.e., he sees something good in the creature and then responds (this is the error or semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism). A second error is that since this whole concept is uncomfortable, we just won’t talk about God hardening certain individuals, we’ll just talk about his mercy (Lutheranism, and some forms of evangelicalism). A third error is to assume that by observing the external conduct of certain individuals we can ascertain what God’s eternal purposes for them truly are (this is the error many Reformed Christians make). If salvation depends upon God’s mercy, and God can be merciful to whom he wishes, then he can save anyone, even those who presently appear to be the most notorious of sinners.

In verse 19 Paul quotes what appears to be a specific objection raised in the Roman congregation. “*One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’*” This is an objection with which we are all too familiar and can be paraphrased as follows: “If the question of why

¹⁰ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 597.

certain people are saved and others not depends upon the sovereignty of God, then how can God blame those who do not believe?" This erroneous assumption leads to a host of other related questions, such as "if God is sovereign, why pray for someone's conversion?" "If God is sovereign, why evangelize?" And so on. Unless people are responsible for their own free actions, they cannot be blamed for not believing the gospel. To some, Paul's teaching seems to eliminate human responsibility.

More than one commentator makes the point that what is remarkable here is what Paul does not say in response to the question.¹¹ Paul does not retreat and mention human works or a human decision. He has already ruled these things by speaking of God's choice of Jacob over Esau. What is more, the apostle does not attempt to limit God's sovereignty to matters of salvation. When pressed by the questioner, Paul pushes the matter of God's sovereignty even farther in verses 20-24. Paul's answer is simply that the questioner had better think about the right to even ask such a question! In this, Paul echoes God's answer to Job in Job 38 ff. which climaxes with verses 1 and 2 of Job 40: "*The LORD said to Job: 'Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!'*" Notice the similarity to what follows in Romans 9 . . . *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath -- prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory."*

Throughout this discussion, Paul makes no attempt to resolve the apparent tension between human responsibility (which Paul clearly teaches when he subsequently speaks of Israel's willful rebellion against Jesus Christ) and God's sovereignty which he is emphasizing to make the point that God has kept his promise to true Israel, even though national Israel presently stands under God's curse. For Paul, both are true. The setting of these two things side by side and then not attempting to resolve them is done throughout the Scriptures. Two examples immediately come to mind. In Genesis 50:19, Joseph speaks of his brothers' intention to do him wrong. Without any kind of a philosophical explanation, Joseph also states that God meant the exact same event for good. Joseph's brothers are guilty for their free acts which also fulfilled God's sovereign purposes. Likewise, in Acts 2:22-24, Luke sets God's sovereignty and the guilt of those who crucified Christ side by side, without any attempt to explain how it is that an event can be foreordained by God, and yet that the perpetrators of that event are considered guilty for their actions. It falls to the systematic theologians to resolve this tension.

Paul's response in verses 19-20 is to remind the questioner of the qualitative (not quantitative!) distinction between the creator and the creature. "*Who are you to talk back to God?*" Quoting from Isaiah 29:16 and 45:9, Paul asks his readers to consider themselves in light of the fact that they have been created by God and formed according to God's will. This discussion must be seen against the backdrop of Psalm 139. Paul's logic is razor sharp and very simple: if we are creatures, does not God have the right to do with us what he wishes? Cannot the creator do what he wants with that which he makes?

In verses 22-23, Paul reinforces this same idea, now framed against the echo of his earlier discussion of Pharaoh. If God is the creator and can do with creation as he wishes, is it not permissible for God to also determine the specific end for all things which he creates? Cannot God sovereignly determine to make some creatures for glorious ends as well as some who are destined for wrath? If the answer we give is

¹¹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 597.

“no,” then we run into the course of redemptive history and the specific examples which Paul has just set forth. Whether we like it or not, the fact of the matter is that God has already done it! To answer “no” to Paul’s rhetorical question also flies in the face of logic. On what basis do we deny the creator the right to do whatever he wants with his creation? Does the common objection of “fairness” even apply under the conditions set forth earlier in Romans? Who are sinners to question the actions of the Holy God?

The reason Paul’s teaching about election is difficult is not an intellectual one. It is not hard to grasp that a sovereign God can do what he wants. But nevertheless this teaching is difficult because it forces us to admit that we are creatures (sinful creatures at that) and that God is sovereign, not us. Paul plainly tells us that God can do with us whatever he wishes. This offends us greatly. God has free will, while our wills are enslaved to sin. And yet how often do sinful creatures object when they read that God is free to exercise his sovereign will? Paul’s answer to such an objection is simply this: “who are you to talk back to God?” God is under no obligation whatsoever to be merciful to sinful rebels.

Having dealt with objections from those who have problems with the distinction made in Romans 9:6 between “all Israel,” and “not all Israel,” or “true Israel,” Paul now returns to the gracious nature of God’s call in verses 24-29. As God has called “true Israel,” Paul now makes the point that God’s mercy and election extend even to those Gentiles who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed, this was the expectation of Israel’s prophets! This represents yet another problem for dispensationalists who argue that the church is a mystery in the Old Testament. Israel’s prophets foresaw that in the messianic age the people of God would be composed of both Jew and Gentile. In verse 24, (which continues the thought in verse 23, that God has chosen certain individuals to be vessels of his glory) Paul makes the case that because God has chosen certain individuals to be objects of his mercy he also calls them to faith in Jesus Christ—*“even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?”* This sovereign call not only includes certain elect Jews, but also Gentiles. And so as he wraps up this section of his argument, the apostle once again appeals to the course of redemptive history.

In verses 25-26 Paul makes the case that Israel’s prophets foretold of the call of the Gentiles to embrace the gospel through faith in Jesus Christ, while in verses 27-29, he will make the same point about the elect Jews, those who are the “true Israel” of God. *“As he says in Hosea: ‘I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,’ and, ‘It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”* Paul cites from Hosea 2:23 and 1:10, but reverses the order and paraphrases them to make the point that certain prophecies which in pre-messianic revelation applied specifically to Israel, are now fulfilled in the church during the messianic age by God’s call of the Gentiles. In his mercy, God will call a people who are not his own (the Gentiles), to be his own (the church), a people who are living in exile at the time of his call (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22). This means the inclusion of elect Gentiles into God’s covenant promises and blessings will be a feature of the messianic age which has dawned in Christ.

But if Hosea speaks of a future for Gentiles in the Messianic age, Isaiah speaks of a role for Israel. In verses 27-29, Paul cites three passages from Isaiah; 10:22, 23; 1:9 to make the point that God has not abandoned Israel nor broken his promise to his people, despite the fact that the nation presently has rejected her Messiah and has come under God’s curse. There will always be a believing remnant according to grace. *“Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.’ It is just as Isaiah said previously: ‘Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.’”*

Paul's point is not to show that God has called Israel. All Jews believed that God called the nation to be his own. Paul's point is that God has called certain Jews ("true Israel") through faith in Jesus Christ to be vessels of his mercy—vessels taken out from among national Israel ("all Israel"). These passages are cited in support of Paul's differentiation between "true Israel" and "national Israel." It is true Israel who is the remnant who will be saved as foretold by Isaiah. The members of true Israel are the true descendants of Abraham and who through faith in Jesus Christ will be heirs to all of the promises. It is unbelieving national Israel (the Jews) which is presently is cut off from the promises.

So where does this leave us? As Paul has already said, God's word does not fail. In the mysterious purposes of God, national Israel has fallen under the covenant curses so that the gospel might go to the Gentiles. But true Israel—the elect remnant according to grace—has received the promise through faith in Jesus Christ. Why? Because God has chosen to do so and the only explanation we are given is this is how God works, according to his eternal purpose and not by reacting to what his creatures do. Is God unjust in this? Paul's answer—"Not at all." And since not one of us deserves what we have been freely given in Christ, when we raise our hands to question God's mysterious ways, we are told in no uncertain terms "who are we—Jew or Gentile—to talk back to God." At the end of the day, we simply affirm what our father Abraham affirmed, "the judge of the earth will do what is right." For God has been merciful to sinners in Jesus Christ, and his final purpose for Israel has yet to be fully realized. And those who believe, are heirs according to the promise, recipients of God's grace and mercy . . . Amen!