[A Free Will Perspective on Romans 9 and Predestination](http://predestination)

**Introduction**

Romans 8:29-30, Ephesians 1, and Romans 9 are texts commonly used by Calvinists to support the doctrine of predestined, irresistible, unconditional election unto salvation – that God chooses ahead of time who will be saved.

In Romans 8:29-30, Paul writes that those whom God “foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son…”

In Ephesians 1, Paul speaks of “the saints” (v. 1) as being chosen by God “before the foundation of the world” in order to be “holy and blameless before Him” (v. 4), and “predestined… to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself” (v. 5).

In Romans 9, Paul gives two examples of God choosing one person over another in a seemingly arbitrary way: Isaac instead of Ishmael (v. 7) and Jacob instead of Esau (v. 12-13). In both cases God chose one person over another, even before they had been born, before they had done anything, and without their consent in the matter. So Paul writes in verse 16: “it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” And in verse 18: “He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” Paul then uses the analogy of a potter and clay. If one asks “Why have you made me like this?” (v. 20) the response is “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?” (v. 21).

The Calvinist interpretation of these texts is that God chooses ahead of time who will be saved, and the people themselves have no say in the matter. This interpretation of the texts is not in harmony with the rest of the Bible. God is revealed in the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16) and in the person of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:9), who is the living Word of God (John 1:14, Revelation 19:13). Jesus dying on the cross “for the sins of the whole world” (John 3:16, 1 John 2:2) reveals that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) and that God “desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4, see also 2 Peter 3:9) and “takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11).

However, the picture of God we get from the Calvinist’s interpretation of Romans 9 is in fundamental conflict with this truth. The idea that God who does not give human beings a choice – but forces some to be saved and others to perish – directly contradicts both the character and will of God revealed in God’s Word. This dangerous doctrine undermines the need for evangelism and leads people to question their own salvation. If salvation is simply a cosmic lottery predetermined by God, and if salvation does not depend on my personal decision to believe, how do I know if I’m one of the lucky ones who God chose to save, and not one of the unlucky ones God chose to condemn? Even if I have assurance of my own salvation, how could I know that my family and friends will be saved, if salvation is predetermined and does not depend on their own decision to believe?

Furthermore, if God saves people simply by choosing them ahead of time without their consent and without requiring them to make a decision to believe, then it is difficult to explain why the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was even necessary. And it becomes seemingly impossible to explain the fall of man in Genesis 3 without acknowledging man’s free will decision to disobey. If even the fall was predetermined by God and was part of God’s will, it seems God is not love after all, and we wonder why, if everything is predetermined, God would grieve that he made man (Genesis 6:6).

Our interpretations of Romans 8:29-30, Romans 9, and Ephesians 1 have massive implications for understanding the rest of the Bible. The key issue here is whether our assumptions and misconceptions about these passages will distort our interpretation of the rest of the Bible, or whether we will allow scripture to interpret itself by understanding these passages *in light of*the truths communicated in the rest of the Bible.

**Understanding the Hebrew Foundation**

These passages of scripture cannot be treated as an island – they must be understood in the context of the Bible as a whole. Too many Christians fail to understand the New Testament because they do not first understand the Old. Paul was a Jew writing from a Hebrew perspective. He was intimately acquainted with the Old Testament and the history of Israel. Establishing Old Testament truth as our foundation is critically important for correctly understanding the New Testament and especially the writings of Paul.

Throughout the Old Testament there is an axiomatic, underlying assumption that all human beings are free moral agents – that we have the ability to choose right, or choose wrong. Human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), endowed with creative capabilities that reflect the creativity of God, albeit on a much smaller scale. Throughout the Bible we see a continuing story of God interacting with His creation. No relationship is possible without free will – love extended out compulsion is not real love. God could have created robots that simply do His bidding and never make free decisions. Instead, God chose to allow free will even though it opened up the possibility of disobedience. It was His good pleasure to do this, because God wants to have a relationship with His creation.

Free will is the reason why we are responsible for our own actions. We are morally responsible only because both obedience and disobedience are within our control. If we did not have the ability to choose right and wrong, we could not justly be held responsible for our actions. Sin is only punishable because we have the ability to do otherwise.

Being free moral agents does not mean we never experience temptation or outside forces that influence our actions. In Genesis 3 we see that God gives Adam and Eve a choice between obedience and disobedience. Eve is tempted by the serpent, and Adam and Eve choose disobedience. God then holds them fully responsible for what they have done. Because of sin, we’ve inherited a sinful nature that desires things contrary to God’s will. Our sinful nature tempts us, but does not control us. We are never forced to sin.

Our DNA, our environment, our relationships, our health, our emotions, the devil, and the Holy Spirit all influence the decisions we make. However, none of these control our decisions. Every decision wee make is our own responsibility, and we can’t pass the buck or blame anyone or anything else.

Free will has always been one of the foundational truths of Judaism. We see this over and over again in the Book of Deuteronomy, where God sets before His people life and death, blessings and curses, and commands them to “choose” (Deuteronomy 30:19). God did not predetermine that Israel would sin. On the contrary, God declares that they have the ability to obey: “the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:14).

Throughout the history of Israel, we see Israel enjoying the blessings of God whenever they choose obedience, and suffering the punishment of God whenever they choose disobedience. The clear message of the Old Testament is that human beings are capable of both good and evil – we choose, and we enjoy or suffer the consequences of what we choose.

In Joshua, we see a clear command for people to “choose” whether they will serve Elohim, or serve idols (Joshua 24:15). From the Exodus through the kings of Israel, we see a repeated failure on Israel’s part to believe God, and a repeated crying out of the prophets, pleading with Israel to choose faith and obedience rather than choose unbelief and disobedience. The sins of Israel deeply grieved God. In Isaiah 5:4, God uses the analogy of a vineyard to describe Israel, and asks, “Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?” God mourned over Israel’s choice of unbelief.

In Mathew 23:37, Jesus mourns over Jerusalem because of Israel’s *unwillingness* to obey God: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.” God wanted one thing for Israel, but Israel was unwilling and chose another. This demonstrates that human beings have free will – it is our decision whether we will obey God or disobey.

**The Prophets Declare Free Will**

“Then the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, ‘Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. I thought, ‘After she has done all these things she will return to Me’; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it.”

-Jeremiah 3:6-7

“‘Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, so you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,’ declares the LORD.”

-Jeremiah 3:20

“They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind.”

-Jeremiah 7:31

“Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind”

-Jeremiah 19:4-5

“They built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.”

-Jeremiah 32:35

Throughout the Book of Jeremiah, God describes the sins of Israel and weeps over Israel’s unfaithfulness. He expects Israel to choose obedience, but they choose disobedience (Jeremiah 3:6-7). Three times, God describes the sins of Israel as things “I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination.” Whether God was actually surprised by the sin, or whether that is simply a Jewish hyperbole, it’s very clear that God did not *want* these sins to happens. They can’t be explained by predestination. Rather, the Israelites made a free will decision to sin. Sin is outside of God’s will. The existence of sin is proof that God’s will is *not* always done!

Throughout the history of Israel, the Israelites repeatedly grieved God with their unbelief. Because they chose unbelief, they wandered for forty years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Because they chose unbelief, they were sent into exile under the Assyrians and Babylonians. Because they chose unbelief, they ultimately rejected the Messiah, and were broken off from God’s covenant family so Gentiles could be grafted in (Romans 9-11).

Hosea is a beautiful picture of this. In one of the most shocking stories in the Bible, God commands Hosea to marry a prostitute and have children with her. When the prostitute leaves Hosea and starts sleeping around, Hosea experiences the heartbreak of his own wife being unfaithful to him. God uses that experience to demonstrate what His own relationship with Israel is like. God wanted a loving relationship with Israel like a man loves his wife, but Israel chose disobedience, unfaithfulness, and unbelief.

The message of Hosea only makes sense if Israel has free will. If God predetermined that Israel would be unfaithful – if that’s what God *wanted*from the beginning – why would God be grieved? If God willed it to happen, why would God feel like a man whose wife was unfaithful? The whole point of the analogy in Hosea is to emphasize Israel’s free will, and the consequences of Israel’s free choices.

Similarly, Ezekiel describes God raising Israel up like a parent caring for an infant. Israel was like an infant laying on the side of the road, covered in blood and filth, and God came along and cleaned Israel, nurtured Israel, raised Israel up, and then Israel rejected God and went its own way. What pain this caused God! If Israel’s actions were predetermined, how can this be explained?

**Free Will Testifies to God’s Power and Love**

Nowhere in God’s Word do we see God controlling every action. The Bible shows us a picture of God in relationship with humanity (and relationship requires two free agents), allowing humans to make decisions, and then responding in turn. He does not force humans to choose one thing or another. He lets them choose freely, and then He responds.

God is not so weak that He needs to control everything. God is so great, so powerful, and so loving, that He is willing to give us the freedom to make our own choices, even though He is sometimes temporarily frustrated by the choices we make.

It would be *easy* for God to simply control everything and force us to do His will. It takes a bigger, more powerful God to allow free will!

Free will is the ultimate testament to God’s love. God knew that by allowing free will, there would be a possibility of sin. But God has a plan for dealing with sin and ultimately eradicating all sin and evil. God loves the world so much that He sent His Son to die for the sins of every person who has ever lived – past, present, and future.

“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

-1 John 2:2

**Faith is a Free Will Decision**

In the gospels, we see Jesus preaching a message of repentance before the soon coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 10:7, Mark 1:15, etc.). We see him commanding his disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel, making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). In the New Testament, there is a strong sense of urgency to get the message of the gospel out to the whole world as soon as possible, because salvation is a choice that an individual makes – a choice to believe in the heart, and confess with the mouth.

“But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”

-Romans 10:8-10

Paul goes on to say in verse 14, “How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?”

If faith were predetermined by God, the answer to Paul’s question would be simple: They’ll believe with or without a preacher, because they’ve been predestined to believe, so it can’t happen any other way! But Paul says the exact opposite: belief can’t happen unless a person hears the gospel and makes a decision to believe. Therefore, there is an urgent need for evangelism.

Salvation by faith is the foundation of Paul’s teaching, and is continually preached in his letters as well as the New Testament as a whole. 65 times in the Book of Acts, Paul or Peter command people to be saved by choosing to believe in Jesus Christ.

A person cannot be forced to believe – belief by its nature *requires* choice. A robot does not “believe” anything, it simply follows its programming. Belief requires us to make our own decision on what we think is true. And throughout the Bible, we see a repeated theme of the choice between belief and unbelief, between obedience and disobedience. We are free moral agents, and we are responsible for the choice we make.

**Predestination and Free Will: Designed to Work Together**

Paul addressed his letter to the Ephesians “to the saints who are in Ephesus” who are “faithful in Christ Jesus” (v. 1). In his opening chapter Paul declares that God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.” (v. 4-6).

As twenty-first century Americans we tend to read scripture from an individualistic perspective. Many assume that when Paul talks about predestination in Ephesians 1, he is talking about God choosing ahead of time which individual people will be saved. But no first century Jew would possibly understand Ephesians 1 in this way.

From the Jewish perspective, God chooses for Himself *a group of people*. In the Old Testament, God chose the descendants of Israel to be His chosen people. God made a covenant with Israel – He chose Israel over all of the other peoples on the earth, simply because He wanted to. He chose, elected, and predestined Israel to be His special people, a nation of priests (Isaiah 61:6), a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6), and the means through which “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3). This is God’s corporate election.

But this does not mean that every individual Israelite is necessarily going to be a light or blessing to the nations. What God predestined for Israel only applies to those individuals *willing* to obey. Israelites who chose to rebel against God and disobey were excluded from the corporate election of Israel, and would not experience the blessings God predestined for Israel. Gentiles who obeyed God were included in the blessings of Israel. This is exactly why Paul writes in Romans 9:6: “they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.”

The Pharisees thought they were holy because of their ancestry. But Jesus said to them, “do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham” (Matthew 3:9).

This is, in fact, the main point that Paul makes in Romans: Salvation is – and has always been – on the basis of faith. Abraham was justified by faith (Romans 4) and everyone who believes and confesses faith in Jesus Christ is also justified (Romans 10:9-10).

Ephesians 1 tells us that from the foundation of the world God chose to have a special body of people (the church) who are “holy and blameless before Him.” But Ephesians 1 does *not*say that God chose each individual person in this body. That God will have His people adopted into His family is predestined. It’s guaranteed. But *your* inclusion in that promise as an individual is dependent on your free will decisions.

The promise of Ephesians 1 is only for “the saints” (v. 1). Therefore, whether or not you experience this in your life depends on whether or not you are a saint (a believer). This depends on your free will choice to put your faith in Jesus Christ. The same is true with Romans 8:29-30.

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

-Romans 8:29-30

This passage of scripture deals with *what*God predestined for believers in Jesus Christ, not *who*He predestined. God promises that every believer will be conformed to the image of His Son. It’s predestined that every believer will be called, justified, and glorified. This is God’s will from the beginning of time, and it’s guaranteed for every believer.

“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

-Philippians 1:6

The controversy with Romans 8:29-30 is the issue of who God “foreknew” and what the word “foreknew” means in this passage of scripture. The word “foreknew” in this passage is translated from the Greek word *proegnō* (Strong’s 4267). Many scholars have pointed out that this kind of knowledge is more than intellectual knowledge, but refers to passionate, emotional intimacy. It has been compared to the Hebrew word *yada* (Strong’s 3045), which is used in Genesis 4:1 to refer to sexual intimacy: “Adam knew Eve his wife” (KJV).

From the Jewish perspective, to “know” someone means to love someone. Therefore, “foreknow” really means “forelove” – to love someone ahead of time. Paul uses the word again in Romans 11:2.

“God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?”

-Romans 11:2

In context, “His people” in this verse refers to Israel. God loved Israel before Israel even existed, because God already had a plan for Israel from the beginning. In the same way, God “foreloves” His church and predestines that everyone in the church will be “conformed to the image of His Son.”

In both cases, what God loves ahead of time is the *corporate group* as a whole, not individuals in particular. God has predestined His will for His church from the beginning. Whether we are part of His church or not depends on our decision to place our faith in Jesus Christ.

**Paul’s Message in Romans 9**

Calvinist interpretations of Romans 9 generally assume this is a chapter on personal salvation. But the text needs to be understood in its context. The first six verses of this chapter are important to understanding the rest of the chapter:

“I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, 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, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel”

-Romans 9:1-6

The issue in Romans 9 is not salvation, but whether “the word of God has failed.” This was a major issue for Paul, who was a Jew, a descendant of Israel, even a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5). And yet Paul’s teachings departed from orthodox Judaism. Paul preached that because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God now adopts Gentiles into His covenant family. This means that Gentile believers in Jesus Christ are equal heirs to the promises of God, equal members of God’s covenant family. Paul writes in Romans 10:12 that there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile.

Jews believed they were saved by being descendants of Abraham and obeying the Law. But Paul taught that *anyone* can be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, even Gentiles. This means that Jewish ancestry and obedience to the Law have no value (Galatians 5:2). This teaching created great controversy in first century Judaism. Jews accused Paul of teaching that God had broken his covenant with Israel and chosen Gentiles instead. In their view, this was impossible and would mean that God’s Word had failed.

The major issue of Romans 9 is the issue of God’s faithfulness to Israel, and how God elects a group of people to his covenant promises. Paul is not concerned in this chapter with an individual’s personal salvation. He is speaking of God’s covenant promise with Israel as His chosen people.

Paul’s message in Romans 9 is that the Word of God has not failed. He argues that God’s covenant with Israel was never based on ancestry or obedience to the law. The Israelites were not God’s chosen people because of any merit on their part. Rather, God chose them simply because He wanted to. Paul’s main message in Romans 9 is that God chooses whatever group of people He wants to represent Him. He chose Israel to be His covenant people, and if He wants to extend His covenant to include Gentiles, He has every right to do so.

**“Jacob I Loved, But Esau I Hated”**

Paul describes how God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau in order to demonstrate that God chooses whatever group of people He wants for Himself, and He doesn’t need to justify His choices to us. Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? We can’t explain why, except to say that it’s what God wanted: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (v. 13). If it seems “unfair” that God chose Jacob over Esau, Paul’s response is simple: “he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” (v. 15-16).

Jews were shocked by Paul’s teaching that God made a covenant with Gentiles through faith in Jesus Christ. From the Jewish perspective, it is the children of Israel alone who are God’s covenant people, and Gentiles are excluded. But Paul counters their arguments by demonstrating that even God’s selection of Israel had nothing to do with Israel’s own merits. God chose Jacob (Israel) simply because He wanted to. If He wants to choose Gentiles in the same way, He can do so.

It’s important to note that Paul’s illustrations of Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau, have absolutely nothing to do with an individual’s personal salvation. Paul is not concerned with the issue of whether Isaac or Jacob are saved. To interpret the text this way is to miss the point. Paul is concerned here with God choosing groups of people to be His covenant people and accomplish His purposes – the children of Israel first, but now also the Gentiles.

Romans 9 is not about an individual’s personal salvation. In fact, the reason Paul chooses Jacob/Esau and Isaac/Ishmael as examples is because they are more than individuals – they represent whole nations. Although Jacob’s name was changed to Israel, the name “Jacob” is still used throughout the Old Testament to refer to the nation of Israel as a whole. God choosing Isaac and Jacob has little or nothing to do with them as individuals. The real meaning is God choosing the nation of Israel (descendants of Isaac/Jacob) over the nation of Moab (descendants of Ishmael) and the nation of Edom (descendants of Esau).

The Calvinist interpretation – that God predetermines ahead of time which individuals will be saved – completely misses the point of what Paul is saying. Paul is talking about entire nations here, not individuals. At the individual level, not all Moabites/Edomites were necessarily condemned, nor were all Israelites necessarily saved. Paul is talking about God choosing one nation to be His people, and one nation not to be His people. An individual’s personal salvation does not even enter the picture.

Paul’s overarching message in Romans 9-11 is that Jews should not be surprised that God is now including Gentiles in His covenant. Paul appeals to Old Testament prophecy to demonstrate that this has always been God’s plan. In Romans 9:25-26 he quotes the prophecy of Hosea: “those who were not my people I will call my people.” In Romans 10:20 he quotes Isaiah, “I have been found by those who did not seek me, I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” My personal favorite is Romans 10:19, “I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.” In Romans 11:11-24 Paul describes the breaking off of the Jews for their unbelief and rejection of the Messiah, and the grafting in of the Gentiles. This is, Paul argues, simply part of God’s plan from the beginning.

**The Flexible Potter and the Stubborn Clay**

Paul uses an illustration of a potter and clay in Romans 9:21-24, “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? 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, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

According to Calvinism, God predetermines who will be saved. A Calvinist interpretation of the text is that God intentionally creates some people to be “vessels for dishonorable use” destined for destruction, in order to demonstrate His wrath.

This interpretation is problematic for two reasons. First, it’s not compatible with the loving character of God revealed in God’s Word and in the person of Jesus Christ. How could God, who “desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9) intentionally create a person for the purpose of destroying him?

The second problem with this interpretation is that it fails to understand the Old Testament origin of the potter and clay illustration. The image of the potter and the clay is a direct reference to Jeremiah 18:1-4, which paints a picture very different from what the Calvinist would expect.

In this passage, God commands Jeremiah to go to the potter’s house. At the potter’s house, Jeremiah watches as the potter works at a wheel, intending to create a certain clay vessel. But the vessel doesn’t turn out the way he wanted, so the potter decides to shape a different kind of vessel out of the clay instead. God uses this illustration to describe His relationship to Israel. God wants to shape Israel a certain way. But if they refuse to cooperate, God can choose shape them into something else instead.

This illustration from Jeremiah is the exact opposite of the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9. According to the Calvinist interpretation, God is a stubborn potter who molds the clay relentlessly until he forces it to be shaped the way he wants. But in Jeremiah, it’s actually the clay that is stubborn, and the potter who is flexible!

In a surprising twist to the story, the potter does *not* get what he originally wants! He originally intends the clay to be one way, but because the clay is stubborn and won’t cooperate, he chooses to shape the clay into something else instead. The potter works with the clay, but he doesn’t force the clay.

Immediately after the story of the potter and the clay, God declares:

“If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.”

-Jeremiah 18:7-10

These verses clearly demonstrate the role of humanity’s free will. Just as a potter acts in response to the clay, God acts in response to our choices. If a nation chooses to repent, God responds by relenting of the disaster He intended for it (this is exactly what happens to Ninevah in the Book of Jonah). Likewise, if a nation chooses to do evil, God can relent of the blessings He intended for it (this serves as a stark warning for our nation today).

God can declare blessing or disaster, but He is willing to relent of either in response to our own decisions. When correctly understood, the analogy of the potter and the clay strongly supports the role of humanity’s free will.

When Paul speaks of the potter and the clay in Romans 9, he says that God “endured with much patience vessels of wrath” (Romans 9:22). The Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9 fails to adequately explain this verse. Why would God have to “endure with much patience” unbelieving people, if He was the one making them unbelieving in the first place?

Why would God say “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (Romans 10:21) if God were the one making them disobedient in the first place? And why, if God desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9) would God ever make someone disobedient in the first place?

The Calvinist interpretation simply falls short of fully explaining the text. God “endures” the vessels of wrath because He doesn’t want them to be that way. It’s not His will that anyone should sin! God has a plan to one day fully eradicate all sin and evil. But for the present moment, God patiently endures sinners in order to give them a chance to repent.

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

-2 Peter 3:9

**The Barren Fig Tree: A Beautiful Picture of God’s Patience**

The picture of God as a potter who patiently endures misshapen clay vessels reminds us of the parable of the barren fig tree in Luke 13:6-9.

In this parable, a tree is about to be cut down because it is not bearing fruit. But the farmer chooses to give it a little more time. He lovingly cares for the tree by digging around it and fertilizing it. Then he waits to see if it will bear fruit or not.

This parable is a beautiful picture of God’s patience with unrepentant sinners. Instead of immediately destroying sinners, God is patient and loving. In His love, He holds back His anger and gives sinners time to repent. He patiently waits, ready to change His anger into mercy the moment a sinner chooses repentance.

Once again the Calvinist interpretation is simply not capable of explaining the biblical text. Why would the farmer fertilize the tree and wait, hoping it will bear fruit, if the farmer is the one who made the tree barren in the first place? This interpretation is way off the mark, and completely misses the point of the parable.

**“I Will Have Mercy on Whom I Have Mercy”**

“For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’”

-Romans 9:15

This verse is a quotation from Exodus 33:19, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.”

This verse is not saying that God chooses to have mercy on people regardless of their free will choices. As we saw with the story of the potter and the clay, the Old Testament verses Paul quotes can only be properly understood from their original Hebrew context.

Exodus 33:19 comes directly after the episode of the golden calf. The Israelites had sinned by choosing to worship an idol while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Law. In response to their decision, God chose to destroy the Israelites (Exodus 32:9-10). But Moses interceded on their behalf and pleaded with God to stop and give the Israelites a chance to repent (v. 11-13). In response, God relented and spared the Israelites (v. 14).

This beautiful narrative is in perfect harmony with the parable of the barren fig tree, as well as the potter and the clay. Once again we see that the potter is not intent on forcing his will no matter what. He’s flexible. The potter might begin shaping the clay one way, but end shaping it another way. This is exactly what we see in Exodus. Although God is about to destroy the Israelites, in response to Moses’ pleading, God relents.

Immediately after this episode, Moses asks God to reveal His glory. God responds by allowing Moses to behold a small fraction of His glory from the cleft of a rock, after God had passed by. It is in this context that God says to Moses, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of Elohim before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.” (Exodus 33:18-19).

The lesson from this passage is clear: God has mercy on people of faith like Moses, but He casts judgment on people of unbelief like the idol-worshipping Israelites. Nevertheless His mercy and His judgment are not set in stone. God changes the way He relates to us in response to our free will decisions.

Like the flexible potter who is willing to reshape the clay into a different vessel, God changes His judgment into mercy if the unfaithful repent. But He can also change His mercy into judgment if the believing become unfaithful. In both cases, God’s action is in direct response to a person’s free will. Therefore, each individual person chooses for himself whether he will be a vessel of mercy or a vessel of wrath prepared for destruction (Romans 9:21-23).

**Breaking Off and Grafting In**

“What shall we say, then?” Paul asks in verse 30. If you read Romans 9 wearing Calvinist tinted glasses, you might expect Paul to answer this question with something like “God predestined some for salvation, others for damnation.” But what Paul actually says is very different. Paul writes in verses 30-31: “Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.”

Faith is what God requires of human beings. The Jews pursued the external things of the law but failed to have faith (Mathew 23) and ultimately rejected the Messiah. They tried to establish their own righteousness through external works, instead of submitting to God’s righteousness which comes by faith (Romans 10:3). The Gentiles, on the other hand, couldn’t pursue righteousness through the law, but they trusted in righteousness by faith. By faith, they attained righteousness and were grafted in to God’s family, while unbelieving Jews were broken off (Romans 11). Paul specifically says in Romans 11:20 that the Jewish people “were broken off because of their unbelief.” It’s as a result of this that they were hardened (Romans 11:7, 25) until “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (11:25). Justification by faith is the final conclusion of Romans 9-11 and an overarching theme in all of Paul’s writings.

Paul’s final conclusion is that God’s “breaking off” of some and “grafting in” of others is done in response to their free will choice to believe or not believe. In Romans 11:22, Paul writes that God extends “severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.”

Notice how the kindness or severity of God is the *result* of one’s own decisions. If we choose unbelief, God responds with severity. If we choose faith, God responds with kindness, *provided* we keep our faith.

This is very clear in Romans 11. Gentile believers who are grafted into God’s family by faith can still be cut off if they choose unbelief (11:22). Likewise, Jews who were cut off because of unbelief can still be grafted in if they choose faith (11:23). In both cases God is a flexible potter!

A person doesn’t have faith because God grafts him in, as the Calvinist would argue. Rather, God grafts him in because he has faith. Likewise, a person does not have unbelief because God breaks him off. Rather, God breaks him off because he has unbelief. A straightforward reading of Romans makes clear the role of free will in this process. The Calvinist interpretation, on the other hand, tries to read the text backwards.

**The Parable of the Wedding Feast**

Consider the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-14. A king invites people to his son’s wedding. Although the parable does not tell us exactly who he invites, we can assume he probably invites everyone you would expect a king to invite – the elite, the noble, the rich, etc. Unfortunately, all of the people he invites decline his invitation for one reason or another. The king doesn’t want to have a wedding with no guests, so he does something radical. He sends his servants out to the streets to invite *anyone* they can find, even “the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind” (Luke 14:21). These people accept the invitation and come to the wedding. The parable ends with this statement: “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14).

God called Israel, and for the most part, Israel rejected the call. So God now extends his invitation to the whole world to see if *anyone* no matter Jew or Gentile, no matter rich or poor, no matter how maimed, no matter how lame, no matter how blind – if *anyone* in all creation is willing to come. Anyone who accepts the invitation is chosen! There is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile, God has extended the same invitation to the whole world, and anyone who hears the gospel message and accepts it is part of God’s chosen people, a people chosen to be holy and blameless (Ephesians 1).

This is what Ephesians 1 and Romans 8-9 are all about. From the foundation of the world, God decided – *He predestined* – that He is going to have a holy and blameless people blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3). And God did something radical: Instead of waiting for people to become holy and blameless on their own(which He knows won’t happen) *he made them holy and blameless*by sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross for the sins of whole world (John 3:16, 1 John 2:2).

If anyone is in Christ, he’s a new creation – he’s forgiven, redeemed, and made righteous before God. God sent out the invitation – the gospel message – to every nation on earth, so anyone who hears it and accepts it (Romans 10:9-15) is made a child of God and joins the holy and blameless group of people God decided from the beginning He’s going to have (Ephesians 1).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places **in Christ**, just as He chose us **in Him** before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us **in the Beloved**.”

-Ephesians 1:3-6

From the beginning, God predestined that anyone who is *in Christ*is chosen to be holy and blameless, adopted as sons, blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. If you’ve chosen to place your faith in Christ, you’re in Him, and this applies to you!

It’s a predestined guarantee that *if* you’re in Christ, you’re going to be made holy and blameless – you are going to be conformed to the image of Christ.

God chose from the foundation of the world to have a special people for Himself. Whether we as individuals are “in” or “out” of God’s chosen people depends on our free will decision to accept Jesus Christ.

Revelation 13:8 declares that the Lamb of God was “slain from the foundation of the world.” God has always had His eternal plan in place. He knew from the beginning that we were going to sin. Sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross was not “plan B.” God knew that by creating human beings with free will, there was going to be sin. But from the very beginning, He always had a plan to eternally solve the problem of sin and ultimately rid the world of evil. He’s in control. He has an eternal plan that He’s perfectly accomplishing in the world. And the question for us is: *Are we willing to be a part of it?*

“Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

-Romans 10:13

“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.”

-Revelation 22:17

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Calvinist interpretations of Romans 8:29-30, Romans 9, and Ephesians 1 are both unbiblical and tragic. Unbiblical for the reasons explained above, tragic because they replace the God of love revealed in the Bible for a god foreign to scripture.

The Calvinist interpretation sees God as creating certain people to be vessels of wrath, then condemning them for being the way He made them, with no moral explanation. This is not at all consistent with God’s love and justice as revealed in the Bible.

The biblical view, on the other hand, demonstrates God’s love through Jesus Christ dying on the cross for the sins of the entire world (1 John 2:2). It upholds God’s desire for all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9) and his gentle patience in giving unbelievers every opportunity to repent (Luke 13:6-9).

God has mercy on whoever he wants, and He hardens whoever He wants (Romans 9:18). But God doesn’t do this in some random, arbitrary way. God chooses to extend mercy in response to faith, and He chooses hardening in response to unbelief. God is the flexible potter who intends to shape the clay one way, but instead of forcing it, He is willing to reshape the clay another way if it doesn’t cooperate (Jeremiah 18:1-4). God works with us with perfect wisdom and acts in loving response to our free will decisions.