

“Is There Injustice on God’s Part?” (1)

Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:6-18

By Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • September 19, 2021 (BSCC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: Norman Geisler, a seminary professor, wrote in his book, *Chosen But Free*, “God is totally sovereign in the sense of actually determining what occurs, and yet man is completely free and responsible for what he chooses.” Roger Olson, another seminary professor, wrote in his book, *Against Calvinism*, that Calvinists teach “that even hell and all who will suffer there eternally are foreordained by God, God is thereby rendered ... a moral monster ... [so there is no] difference between God and the devil.”

Both of these professors disagree with the teaching of Jesus and Paul that man does not have “free will” when it comes to faith in Christ and repentance from sins. In fact, both Jesus and Paul say that all unbelievers, excepting no one, are slaves of sin (John 8:34; Rom 6:16-17). All of them are unable and unwilling to believe without the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts (John 3:3).

Today, we will study a doctrine that is unique to the 16th century Protestant Reformers such as John Calvin, Martin Luther and John Knox. This doctrine, called unconditional election, is dear to our Reformed forefathers and to faithful Reformed churches today.

What is this doctrine? Geisler and Olson also believe in election or predestination. But there’s an unbridgeable chasm between their view and our doctrine. They believe that in eternity past, God saw every single person who will believe in him, so God chose them for salvation. This view is completely opposite of our belief. We believe that in eternity past, God predestined every single person according to the good pleasure of his sovereign will and mercy. This is an undeniable fact from several places in Ephesians 1 alone: verses 5-7, 9, 11 and 12. His choice was based on his sovereign choice alone, not on a foreseen faith that the elect will exercise of their own “free will.” What’s horribly wrong with this “free will” view? Since all mankind is enslaved to sin, no one understands God, and no one seeks for God (Rom 3:10-11), then if left to themselves, no one will be saved! That’s a horrible doctrine! God chose them before he created the world, and God is the one who would intervene in their hearts to save them. No one can save himself.

In Romans Chapter 9, Paul begins with his struggle and lament over the unbelief of his fellow Jews. They have heard the gospel of Christ, but very few were being saved. He is so sorrowful that he is willing to be accursed by God for the sake of the salvation of the Jews (1-3). God blessed them with adoption, covenants, glory, worship and promises to their forefathers. He even blessed them with their own brother Jesus who is their only salvation. But they rejected him. But in the opening verse 6, Paul says, “*But it is not as though the word of God has failed.*”

And then in verse 14, after explaining the doctrine of God’s sovereign will in choosing whom he will save, Paul asks a rhetorical question, “*What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part?*” And his answer is, “*By no means!*” or in modern terms, “Absolutely not!” “No way!” So our theme is the first of two parts on, “**Is There Injustice on God’s Part?**” (1) under two points.

When He Loved Jacob but Hated Esau

How then does Paul explain that God's word to Israel has not failed? He started with God's covenants with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He says in verses 6b-7, *"For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but **"Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."*** What does he mean in saying that *"not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel"*? What he does with this statement is distinguishing between the physical Israel, the descendants of Abraham by blood, and the spiritual Israel, the descendants through faith in God. There is a small Israel within the whole Israel. The small, spiritual Israel includes all those who believed in God's promises to Abraham. The greater Israel includes all who descended from Abraham by blood. This is why he says in verse 8, *"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."*

God's promise of blessing belonged only to the spiritual children of Abraham. Abraham had two sons: Ishmael, through his slave Hagar, and Isaac, through his true wife Sarah. But God's promise of blessing to Abraham and his descendants was to be fulfilled only through Isaac. Only Isaac's children will be called the true descendants of Abraham, *"Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."* Elsewhere, this difference in Galatians 4:23, *"But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise."* Hagar's son was the fruit of both Abraham and Sarah trying to force God's hand to give them a son after waiting many years for the covenant son to be born. So Ishmael was born to them because of their unfaithfulness to God, while Isaac was born thirteen years later as God had promised them.

Then, in verses 10-13, Paul goes on to the next generation, Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac. He says that when Rebekah conceived them, God told her, *"The elder shall serve the younger."* This was a surprise to Isaac and Rebekah because usually, the eldest son has most of the privileges and the largest inheritance. As in God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael, his choice of Jacob over Esau is his own sovereign prerogative. Paul says that when they were still in the womb, not having done anything good or bad, God already elected Jacob and not Esau. It is not that God saw Jacob using his own "free will" to have faith in God, but that God chose him only according to his own will.

And then we come to a most controversial verse about predestination, verse 13, *"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."* Paul is quoting Malachi 1:2-3, where Malachi prophesies the destruction of the Edom, another name for Esau, that "wicked country." This destruction came after God sent the Babylonians to destroy Israel and exile them to Babylon. The descendants of both Jacob and Esau were both destroyed by God because of rebellion and unbelief. Yet, because God chose Jacob as his covenant people, he restored them from the Babylonian exile, while the nation of Edom completely vanished from the face of the earth. Remember also that Esau sold his birthright as the oldest son to Jacob for a bowl of porridge. He did not care for his privileges as the oldest son.

However, there are pastors and teachers who want to minimize the harshness of these words by interpreting the verse as, *"Jacob I have loved, but Esau I loved less."* These are those who

teach that God loves everyone, including unrepentant sinners, saying God loved both Jacob and Esau, but he loved Jacob more and Esau less. This is a serious misinterpretation. All the Hebrew lexicons translate the words as, "Esau I *hated*." This is the same word used in Psalm 5:5, where David describes God's hatred against the wicked, "*The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.*" The same word is used also in Psalm 11:5, "*The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.*" When Hebrews 1:9 quoted Psalm 45:7, "*You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness,*" the writer used the Greek word for "hated." Therefore, the force of God hating Esau because of his wickedness should not be downplayed by saying God loved him *less*. God hated him. Period.

But beware, brothers and sisters. God choosing you out of all the human race for salvation should not make us proud, arrogant and complacent. We must not trumpet our election and salvation as if we did it ourselves. We must be humbled by the truth that we also were wicked, unrepentant sinners before God saved us in Christ. The other danger is complacency, where we sit on our hands because we are assured of heaven. Our Lord Jesus Christ commands us to be witnesses for him, to be salt and light to the world with our words and deeds. Do not ever think that since God already predestined those whom he will save, that we do not have to witness to our family and friends. And do not ever think, "once saved, always saved," even if you are doing evil works. Do not be deceived, if that is what you are thinking, you might not even be one of God's elect!

Another caution to remember is the thought that because you are a member of a church, attend church regularly, and hear the gospel preached, you are a member of God's elect. Salvation does not depend on your outward membership and presence, but on your inward faith and repentance. Remember, not all Israel is Israel, only those who are children of God's covenant promises to his people by being united to Christ in faith. We read in Galatians 3:29 this truth about who Abraham's true children are, "*And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*"

Therefore, there is no injustice in God's part when he elected Jacob and his descendants as his covenant people while passing over Esau and the rest of mankind.

When He Had Mercy on Israel but Hardened Pharaoh

Paul knew the reaction of those who would read his words in this chapter. "*Is there injustice on God's part?*" This is the same reaction throughout church history up to this day. It's like little kids who pout when they think that their parents did not treat them fairly, "It's not fair!"

"Absolutely not!" Paul retorts. How can God who is perfectly loving, gracious and merciful be unfair? He cannot. It is against his divine character. So Paul gives another example: the Israelites and the Pharaoh of Egypt. He quotes Moses when God's anger was kindled against the Israelites' idolatry when they worshiped the golden calf. God told Moses that the people are stiff-necked and rebellious, so he would not lead them into the Promised Land. But Moses mediated for them, asking God to relent from his judgment, for his sake and for the sake of his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God then relented, but told Moses in Exodus 33:19, "*I will be gracious to whom I will be*

gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” Again, God reminded Moses of his sovereign will. It is all up to his sovereign will as to whom he shall be gracious and merciful. Nothing that Moses will do will change his will. He has chosen his people, gave them his gracious covenant promises, and he will fulfill all of them, even after they had been unfaithful and rebellious.

Therefore, Paul states in verse 16 what many Christians miss when they think that it was out of their own free will to believe and repent. Paul states what is obvious from his previous statements, *“So then it depends not on **human will or exertion**, but on God, who has mercy.*” Again, there is nothing in man’s will and works that will merit his salvation. It is only by God’s mercy that anyone is saved. Therefore, if God decided that he will not save anyone, he is justified and righteous, because all mankind is sinful, and the penalty against sin is eternal punishment.

Paul then demonstrates God’s sovereign will that is totally independent of man’s will and works. He cites the Pharaoh for another example, by quoting what God said to Pharaoh in verse 17, *“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”* (Exo 9:16). God will use all of Pharaoh’s wickedness to demonstrate that he is all-powerful and all-glorious. Pharaoh was born for this purpose alone. Then in verse 18, Paul writes another hard saying about God’s sovereign choice, *“So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”* He chose to be merciful to the Israelites, but to harden Pharaoh’s heart. God’s word says that salvation depends on God’s will alone, not on our own sinful will. R. C. Sproul puts this succinctly, *“The elect receive *mercy*. The non-elect receive *justice*. No one receives *injustice* at the hands of God.”* The only ones who come to Christ are those whose hearts have been regenerated first by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3). Only then they willingly come and embrace Christ as their Savior.

God sovereignly chose Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and the Israelites over the Egyptians. Next Sunday, we will study the last of Paul’s example: the potter and the clay.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, some people who have heard about this doctrine of unconditional election, but do not understand what it really is, call us in jest, “the frozen chosen.” Why? Because they have seen and heard the arrogance and smugness of Reformed people, as if they are the only true Christians. Some Reformed folks even tell others that if they don’t believe in this doctrine, they are lost.

Beware. The Canons of Dort I:18 cautions us as to the “proper attitude toward election.” It says that we must have a “reverent adoration of these secret things” and with the Apostle Paul, cry out in awe and wonder, *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”*

God is totally sovereign in his will, and his word cannot fail because it is faithful and just, trustworthy and eternal (Psa 111:7-8).