**Romans 9: Is God in control or do we have freewill? – By Thailer Jimerson**

Last Wednesday I addressed Paul’s parenthesis (**Romans 9-11**) of the place of Israel in God’s bigger plan of salvation. Towards the end of the lecture, we broached the topic that most immediately think about when reading Romans 9. When people are confronted with words like “predestination” and “election” they immediately wonder if God saves people regardless of their own choice as John Calvin has classically thought. However, you don’t have to be a Calvinist (I’m not) to deal fairly with Paul’s statements about the sovereignty of God.

Instead of running away from this doctrine, we as responsible students of the scripture must try to understand how the Bible depicts our God as a being who exerts far more influence and control (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc.) than we’d ever dare admit. **Simply put, the Bible declares** (especially in Romans 9.11-24) **that God is in control.** What else are we to conclude from **Romans 9.11-24**? Was Paul inventing this idea or was it a profound revelation about the Creator contained everywhere in the holy scriptures that Paul grew up reading? Let me suggest the latter.

What would you conclude about the following verses? Eli’s sons would not listen to rebuke *because* the Lord willed to put them to death (**1Sa.2.25**); The king wouldn’t listen to the people *because* the Lord sought to bring him down (**1Kg.12.15**); “The Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom” (**2Sa.17.14**; see also **2Ch.22.7**); It was not even beneath God to commission a lying spirit to cause false prophets to lie to wicked Ahab to bring about his fall (**1Kg.22.19f**), nor to even use Satan himself in order to test Job (**Job1.21-22**). With this the proverbs agree: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision if from the Lord” and “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (**Pr.16.33; 21.1**). Even over the most evil act in history, God was present, guiding all the wicked actions of man against them to accomplish his great purpose of salvation for all people – **Acts 4.24-28**.

So, do we conclude that our God is aloof, indifferent and distant from our actions? No, but he’s there all along, somehow, someway exerting his providential and sovereign guiding hand to bring about his purpose. The God Israel knew was the God reflected in Nebuchadnezzar’s prophetic utterance in **Daniel 4.35**, “all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitant of the earth; and none can stay His hand or say to Him, ‘What have you done?’” It’s not that he wills wickedness or delights in it, but he allows it and sovereignly steers it to serve his purpose for ultimate good. This is reflected in Joseph’s revelatory thought: **Ge.50.20** when, upon reflecting on everything that had befallen him, he says “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

**But, secondly, the Bible also declares that His control and overseeing eye is not divorced from our actions or choices** – that, in other words, there is such a thing as freewill. If you follow Paul’s argumentation and quotations closely in Romans 9, you’ll notice he quotes **Jeremiah 18** to support his thought of God having power as a molder over the clay. But if you go back to Jeremiah 18 and read verses 1-10 you’ll see that God’s control never precluded Israel’s own choices or complicity. I won’t cite passages proving freewill because the doctrine is implicit everywhere. We can, however, get a glimpse of how this works in an interesting passage in **Acts 27**. In verses 22 and 31 we see the tension upheld. In verses 22-26, Paul tells his shipmates simply that no one will die because God has granted to him all the lives on the ship. Yet in verse 31, when some try to cut down lifeboats to escape, he says “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” So which is it? God keeps us alive, or we keep ourselves alive. Answer: Both are true.

These two doctrines seem opposed, almost contradictory. Does God choose, or do we? So do we emphasize one doctrine to the neglect of the other? No – we affirm both. Just because we can’t understand where they meet at the root, doesn’t mean anyone is any less true than the other. It’s not either/or but both/and – just like the doctrine of God’s triune nature. Is he one God or three persons? Well, both.

We can’t understand this, but is it really in man to understand? Maybe instead of trying to put God underneath our magnifying glass of reason and logic, maybe we’re meant to bow in awe and worship at the God beyond comprehension. (And don’t forget, this is a very scriptural response to the Creator of the cosmos since we see this very response in David himself after he ponders God’s sovereignty in **Ps.139.6**). As we glimpse just for a moment “God’s foot on the treadle of the loom,” maybe we’re meant to say worship and say with Paul at the conclusion of his thoughts in **Romans 11.33**: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”