

A pair of hands is shown shaping a clay pot on a pottery wheel. The hands are positioned on either side of the pot, with fingers resting on the rim and the body. The pot is a simple, wide-mouthed vessel with a slightly flared top. The background is dark, making the hands and the pot stand out. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the clay and the skin of the hands.

ROMANS 9

THE TEXT THAT
COLLAPSES
SYNERGISTIC
ESCAPE ROUTES

Romans 9 —The Text No Synergist Can Escape

Abstract

The key to Paul's argument in Romans 9 begins with Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael represents human initiative—an attempt to bring about God's promise through human planning and strength. While synergists may argue this is not “cooperation” in the strict sense (since God never commanded it), the point remains: Ishmael's birth rests on human effort, not divine action. Isaac, by contrast, exists solely because of God's sovereign promise and power. Believers are “children of promise... like Isaac,” meaning God continues to fulfill His own promise to Abraham. Once this is understood, synergism collapses entirely, for salvation depends on God alone.

Introduction

There are passages in Scripture that trouble the proud heart precisely because they silence it. Romans 9 is such a passage. It is not obscure, nor is it tangled in philosophical footnotes. It is clear—devastatingly clear—and that clarity is the very thing the human heart resists and wants desperately to either ignore, distort, or deny. To do this, objectors devise multiple “escape routes”—so called because by them they seek to escape the obvious meaning and implication of the text. I emphasize the text for good reason—it wasn't John Calvin or Martin Luther or Augustine who wrote the book of Romans or who wrote Romans Chapter 9! Yet the way many objectors talk and write, one would be tempted to conclude that they imply “a Calvinist” did write Romans 9.

The fact is, there is no biblical basis for the opinion that John Calvin originated these doctrines. Augustine taught them 1,000 years before Calvin was born, and church fathers such as Chrysostom affirmed that faith itself is entirely the gift of God—not produced by human will or effort in any capacity. These men long preceded Calvin. They read the text as written, in context, and concluded the same things Calvin concluded—not because of Calvin, but *because of Paul*.

“Children of Promise – Like Isaac”

Paul, being an astute “Pharisee of the Pharisees,” as he referred to himself prior to his conversion, knew the Old Testament. He knew full well the meaning and implication behind God’s choice of Abraham, then Isaac over Ishmael, then Jacob over Esau. In Galatians, Paul makes a profound argument: believers in Jesus Christ are “children of promise,” *just like Isaac* (Gal 4:28).

✚ **But whose promise was it? Not Abraham’s promise to God—it was God’s promise to Abraham.**

The reason Ishmael was rejected—though born to Abraham—was because Ishmael was the child produced *by human effort*, human planning, human strength. Isaac was the child brought into being *only by* the supernatural power of God. Isaac, therefore, is the human baby that embodies monergism. Ishmael embodies synergism. And to object—“Abraham still had to be intimate with Sarah”—misses the point entirely, for *unless God performs the miracle*, Isaac is not conceived, regardless of how often Abraham and Sarah try.

Theological “escape routes” are in my opinion, crafted for emotional or philosophical reasons—not exegetical ones.

Romans 9:16 Infuriates Fallen Pride

When the text declares that salvation “does not depend on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy” (Rom 9:16), it instantly obliterates all synergistic models that make God’s mercy a response to human will. Salvation cannot simultaneously be “not of him who wills,” yet also “of him who wills.” One view must yield—and Scripture *never* yields to us.

Human nature rebels against this. Synergism insists that God may offer, invite, enable, call, woo, convict—but the decisive hinge of salvation remains in the creature. Tell them otherwise, and emotion erupts: “That’s not fair!” “A loving God would never!” “My God would not do that!” But emotionalism does not overturn Paul’s argument. Romans 9 upholds it.

Romans 9 destroys this illusion at every turn.

Paul's argument is not complex. It is unwelcome. It dismantles every escape route, closes every loophole, and speaks with divine authority. Because accepting it requires the death of pride, interpreters have repeatedly sought softer readings—corporate, national, vocational, “fairness” readings—anything to avoid the plain force of Paul's words.


But the text stands.

And no synergist can escape it, despite how hard they try.

I. Election Before Effort: God's Choice of Isaac, Not Ishmael

Paul begins with Abraham's two sons. Both share the same father, the same covenant line, the same heritage. One might assume God would, or should, choose them both. Yet God declares: “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” Paul then moves to Jacob and Esau, where the argument becomes unmistakable. In His sovereignty, God divides the covenant line again—choosing Jacob, not Esau, even though both were born to Isaac.

Paul understood this. Synergistic models do not. They ignore, redact, or openly deny the text to make it fit their systems rather than bending their systems to Scripture.

 **Romans 9 is not about nations. It is not about earthly roles. It is about God's sovereign choice to show mercy preceding human response. His sovereign choice in both sequence and in decisiveness.**

Popular objection attempts to soften this - “‘Love’ means ‘loved more,’ not ‘loved vs. hated.’” *But this solves nothing.* Telling someone, “God loves *me* so much that what He feels for you is equivalent to hate” does not comfort the one so told! In fact, it might be *worse*. The point remains: the comparison is *extreme*.

Just because Jesus said that as His followers, we are to *comparatively* “hate” our family, friends – even our own life, if need be (Luke 14:26), does not make the synergistic objection valid either. First, It is obvious in context that there is only

one condition - one circumstance in which the believer would be required to comparatively “hate” anyone else compared to Christ – that sole circumstance is *if* they are required to make a decisive choice as in, “It’s Jesus or US!” In all other contexts, His command is that we “love one another.” But it is not reasonable or righteous or *humble* to assume that what God requires of us is binding on what *He* as sovereign, Creator, Judge, Potter and Lord, can or cannot do with the clay. Therefore, the synergistic objection assumes far too much when it cites Jesus telling his followers that they need to hate their family friends loved ones or even their own lives.

Result? Escape route closed.

II. Jacob and Esau —The Death of the “Foreseen Faith” Objection

Twin brothers, conceived at the same moment, born into the same covenant family to the same chosen man - Isaac. Paul removes *every* possible appeal to foreseen merit in or foreseen faith in Jacob by stating that God’s choice was made “*before* they were born or had done anything good or bad.”

Before they lived.

Before they believed.

Before they acted—good or bad.

God chose Jacob. God rejected Esau. Why? Not because of foreseen faith. And to be clear, “foreknown works” are *still* works, and Paul excludes them categorically as the basis of God’s choice!

The basis?

“God’s purpose according to *His* choice... not because of works but because of Him who calls” (Rom 9:11–12).

An objection sometimes raised: “Esau never served Jacob in Genesis!” The implication: Paul was wrong. Such an idea is *prima facie* absurd! Paul refers to *redemptive* purpose, not mundane earthly interaction. Nations emerge from individuals. The older serves the younger in *God’s redemptive plan* - it is “*mercy*” in its saving aspect that is the subject and focus of verses 14-18, 20-24.

Result? Escape route closed.

III. The Objection That Proves the Doctrine

Paul teaches unconditional election. He anticipates an objection that seals the case:

“Is there injustice with God?”

“Why does He still find fault? Who can resist His will?” (Rom 9:14, 19)

These objections *only* arise if Paul is teaching individual salvation. If the chapter were merely about earthly roles, national destinies, or temporal arrangements, no one would object. No one cries “unfair!” because someone becomes a king, another a farmer. Such trivialities could not provoke such emotional protest as Paul anticipated.

Here is another escape route - “Paul means nations, not individuals.” But Paul explicitly says, “before *the twins* were born.” Individuals. Even if one insisted the text refers to nations—*how* does it help to say God “hates” an entire nation rather than an individual? Nations are made up of people.

Result? Escape route barred.

IV. Paul’s Answer —Sovereignty Without Apology

Paul does not retreat. He does not soften. He *intensifies* his argument!

“Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”

In modern vernacular: “Who do you think *you* are?”

 **God is Potter. Man is clay. Clay has no rights except those assigned by the Potter.**

Result? Escape route closed.

Some object: “We shouldn’t push the potter/clay metaphor too far.” But the metaphor exists *to be pushed*. Isaiah used it. Jeremiah used it. Paul applies it to God’s sovereign right to show mercy to whomever He wills (Rom 9:14–18).

Result? Escape route closed.

V. Vessels of Wrath and Vessels of Mercy —Eternal Categories

“Vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” (Rom 9:22)

“Vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory.” (Rom 9:23)

These are eternal categories - judgment and glorification. What earthly “job” corresponds to being prepared for glory? None. Once again, objection, redaction or denial leads to absurdity.

Result? Escape route barred.

Critical Clarification: The Context of the Fall

Note the grammatical precision Paul employs:

Vessels of mercy are explicitly said to be “prepared beforehand” (προητοιμάσεν) *by* God for glory.

Vessels of wrath, by contrast, are described as “prepared” (κατηρτισμένα, passive voice) for destruction—but Paul does not explicitly say “God prepared them”.

While the preparation of the vessels of mercy is *active* – explicitly said to be “by God,” the preparation of the vessels of wrath is *passive* in Greek – God is not explicitly stated to be the One who *actively* creates some *for* destruction. Their *own* sin has “prepared” them. God’s choice to “harden” is therefore best understood as His sovereign decision to abandon them to the state and result of their own sin – His final judgement.

“**Mercy**” is not a “right” the sinner can demand – such an idea is both absurd logically and theologically, since by definition mercy is “*unmerited* favour.” Thus, there can be no *legitimate* complaint of “Unfair!” Or “Unjust!” if God for His *own* reasons, chooses to withhold the giving of it to some. *Only if* the sinner were *entitled* to mercy and God arbitrarily chose to deny them what they had a right to, could the objection have any validity. But as it stands, contemplating

humanity as fallen in Adam – and this *is* how Paul in the entire book of Romans sees humanity, God may choose to have mercy on whom He wills – as the text plainly says. And before I leave off this point, I want to make this very clear: There can be no doubt that Paul *does* contemplate “the clay” as *fallen in Adam*, because.

1. Only sinners require saving and saving requires mercy.
2. Only sinner merit judgement.
3. Paul is *not* teaching God forces innocent clay to sin, then damns them for it!

✚ **This is not evasion. This is theological *precision*. And it must be upheld!**

Both categories presuppose humanity fallen in Adam. Why? Because chapter 9 is still part of the book of Romans as a whole – and that book expressly teaches that humanity is collectively viewed as fallen “in Adam.”

✚ **Only sinners need mercy. Only sinners merit justice.**

When Paul speaks of God's choice of Jacob over Esau “before they were born or had done anything good or bad,” he excludes their *personal* works—good or evil—as the basis of election. But he does not present them as morally neutral beings. They are still part of fallen humanity in Adam. The fall had already occurred. They, like all humanity, were conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5), born under Adam's headship (Rom 5:12-19), and by nature objects of wrath (Eph 2:3).

Election, therefore, is **rescue**—not random selection from morally neutral ground. God does not create vessels for destruction, force them to sin, then damn them for it. Such is an oft-repeated caricature of the truth and the doctrine – but it is not the doctrine, nor the truth. Nor it is the opinion of this writer. He finds them already fitted for it *by the Fall*, endures them with patience, and makes His power and wrath known through them (Rom 9:22). But vessels of mercy? These He **actively prepares beforehand** *for glory*—saving them from what they, along with all humanity, justly deserve.

The asymmetry is intentional. **Mercy is what can never be earned**, and so it is the exception. **Wrath is what sin earns**. God is glorified in **both**—in justice fully satisfied, and in mercy freely given.

VI. Paul's Application —Calling, Salvation, Grace

“Even *us* whom He called...” (Rom 9:24)

Paul applies sovereign election to believing Jews and Gentiles - saved by grace. Hosea's imagery - “Not My people... now My people” - is salvation language. It is redemption, covenantal language.

Paul includes himself.

Result? Escape route closed.

VII. Paul's Anguish —The Final Nail

Romans 9:1–3 only makes sense *if* salvation is not in human hands. If humans were the decisive ones in the question of saving-mercy, Paul would not despair so deeply. He would try harder, speak more persuasively, hope for one more to “choose life.” But he speaks nothing like this in the chapter. And Paul's lament in verses 1-3 is far too often neglected in its context by both sides of the debate. His anguish presupposes monergism.

Result? Escape route closed.

 **Every synergistic escape route—nations, roles, corporate election, fairness concerns—is refuted by Paul's argument.**

IX. The Pastoral Beauty of Sovereign Grace

This doctrine does not crush hope—it creates it. If salvation depended on human will, none would be saved. But because salvation depends on God’s purpose, all whom He calls will come (John 6:37, 44, 65; Rom 8:28–30).

He keeps them *by* the effectual intercession of Christ (Rom 8:33–34; Heb 7:25).
God is not reacting. **He is rescuing.**

His purpose will never fail.

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of his glory blameless with great joy” (Jude 1:24)

Sola Gratia, Soli DEO Gloria.