INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS. ROMANS 9-11.

These are very unique chapters in that they answer a question that no other part of Scripture answers: How does the Old Testament fit into the New Testament? More specifically, how does the nation of Israel, which was central to God’s work in the Old Testament, fit into “the Church,” which is central to God’s work in the New Testament?

Paul is writing to a predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish) audience in the city of Rome. He was called by God to be the apostle to bring the good news to the Gentile world. In the first 8 chapters of this letter, he has been explaining how people are brought back into relationship with God on an individual, person-by-person basis, Gentile or Jew.

But this emphasis on the gift of God’s love for all people, raises the question about God’s “chosen people” from the Old Testament – the Jews. God set apart the Jews as a nation and gave them a special place in His plan to save the world. Paul himself was Jewish and he had a huge heart for his fellow countrymen.

The problem was that, for the most part, the Jewish nation rejected Jesus as their Messiah. When you read the first 8 chapters of the book of Acts, you see this clearly. The first 8 chapters of Acts show the ministry of the early Church in Jerusalem, after the resurrection of Jesus. The apostles were reaching out to their fellow Jewish countrymen, pleading with them to repent for their rejection of Jesus the Messiah. The stoning of Stephen (Acts 7), a young church leader, was the final “NO” of the Jewish leaders to the apostolic appeal to receive Jesus as their crucified and risen Savior. From Acts 8 onwards, the Church turned outward toward the Gentile world with the message of Jesus.

Interestingly, it was the apostle Paul who viciously hated and persecuted the first Christians! It was Paul who drove them out of Jerusalem (see Acts 8). It was Paul (then known as Saul) who guarded the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen to death!

Later in the story, Saul became a Christian, and the foremost messenger of Jesus the Messiah. All through his ministry he maintained a huge heart for his fellow countrymen, who were still rejecting Jesus. Paul started his ministry in every city by going “to the Jew first” (see Romans 1:16). In once city after the next, a similar pattern occurred. A small group of Jews would place their faith in Christ as their Messiah. These Jews would then become the nucleus of the new church in that city. Alongside these Jewish believers would come many Gentile converts who also were woven into the young church.

This was a very new experience for both the Jews and the Gentiles, because in previous times, the Jews maintained strict boundaries between themselves and Gentiles (since they considered Gentiles to be unclean). Now, they are mingling together in the name of Christ in these budding young church communities.

You can almost imagine the question arising at a meeting one day. Maybe a Gentile convert raised the question: “Hey, what ever happened to God’s special plan for you Jewish people as outlined in the Old Testament? Did God give up on you guys?” Paul addresses these questions in Romans 9-11. Israel’s past (ch.9). Israel’s present (ch.10). Israel’s future (ch.11). As you read these chapters, you can feel the agony of Paul’s heart for his nation. He is deeply burdened for their salvation.

ISREAL: A PRIVILEGED NATION. ROMANS 9:1-5.

Paul was a Jewish Christian. Before he became a follower of Christ, he was one of the most devoted, passionate young Jewish men of his day.
“You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted God’s church. I did my best to destroy it. I was far ahead of my fellow Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors” (Galatians 1:13,14).

“I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault” (Philippians 3:5,6).

After he became a Christ-follower, he longed for his fellow Jews to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. You hear his heart in the opening lines of chapter 9:

“I speak the truth in Christ - I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit - I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen” (Romans 9:1-5 New International Version).

“Cut me off and save them, O God!” What a heart he had for his people. Great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart. I wish we all felt such a burden for the people close to us who don not yet know Jesus. Paul models the right heart for the lost people who are closest to us.

Paul is most grieved because Israel has missed their greatest privilege of all: the privilege of bringing the Messiah “who is God over all,” into the world. Did you notice the wording there? Read 9:5 again. “Messiah, who is God . . .” It is passages like this one that has caused historic Christianity down through the ages to maintain that Jesus IS God; not just a man, or a prophet, or a great religious leader; but GOD in flesh.

What a privileged history the Jews had. When they came out of Egypt and began their life as a nation, Moses told Israel how uniquely privileged they were:

“Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived? Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? (Deuteronomy 4:32-34).

If you read through the Old Testament you will see that it is almost entirely about one group of people – the Jews. It is about their history, their journey with God, their role as God’s representatives to the entire world. The Historical Books (Genesis – Esther) follow the course of Israel’s history for roughly 1,000 years, beginning with their founding father Abraham (Genesis 12). The Prophetic Books (Isaiah – Malachi) record the words and messages of the Jewish prophets who were God’s spokesmen, calling the Jewish people back to obedience. The Poetic Books (Job – Ecclesiastes) give us a taste of the wisdom and worship of the people of God.
It’s all about the history of the Jews. Why? Because God needed witnesses to the world. At the heart of the Old Testament narrative is the Jewish Law (Exodus). Moses gave to Israel God’s Laws, which formed a covenant agreement between God and Israel. By obeying this set of covenant regulations, Israel would maintain their status as God’s representatives among all the nations on earth. They would be a “nation of priests” mediating God’s blessings to the whole world. A key passage to understand Israel’s unique role in God’s plan is found in Exodus 19, just before God gave them His laws:

“Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation. This is the message you must give to the people of Israel” (Exodus 19:5,6).

The Old Testament is, in short, the record of Israel trying to live out its’ calling to be God’s “kingdom of priests” to the entire world. A priest brings man and God together. So Israel was NOT chosen to be God’s one and only nation. No, Israel was chosen to be God’s one special nation of witnesses that would call all nations back to God. God gave Israel special privileges and responsibilities; but God was not saying, “These are the only people I really care about.” God loves the whole world, and Israel was His means of showing that love to all nations. They were to be God’s witnesses to the world.

But now, Israel has rejected Jesus, the long awaited Messiah, the Son of David, the One promised by the prophets. Now what? What will God do with this special group of people? Paul will answer this, gradually, in chapters 9-11. But first, Paul wants to raise some very difficult, and lofty questions about how GOD’S PLANS are impacted (or not impacted) by HUMAN CHOICES. Remember the old debate you heard in College Philosophy class between “determinism” versus “free will?” Well, Paul wades into the theological version of that issue in chapter 9. Divine sovereignty and human free will; how do these work together. Paul poses a series of questions.

**QUESTION #1: DOES GOD’S PLAN DEPEND ON MAN’S CHOICE?**

**ROMANS 9:6-13.**

“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. 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.” In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.” Not only that, but Rebekah’s children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad - in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls - she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

**ANSWER #1: GOD’S PLAN FOLLOWS GOD’S CHOICES.**

The big message in the 9th chapter of Romans is that man’s choices – even the choice to NOT believe – can ultimately only serve to confirm (fit in with) God’s choices.

Paul is making the point that God’s plan to bring salvation to the whole world is not tied
simply to the physical descent of everyone in Abraham’s line. If you go back to the early part of Israel’s history in Genesis, you will see that God chose to work with specific lines of people within Abraham’s clan. Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. God chose to work with the line of Isaac, not the line of Ishmael. In the very next generation, Isaac had two sons: Esau and Jacob. God chose to work with the line of Jacob, not the line of Esau. You have to know a bit of Old Testament history to understand what Paul is getting at here. Let me diagram it for you. God chose to form the nation Israel through a specific line within Abraham’s family tree.

Abraham

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| Esau    |

Jacob’s name was changed by God to “Israel.” Jacob had twelve sons, who became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. Thus, as Paul is showing, even in the Old Testament, God’s plan followed a very specific line within Abraham’s overall group of descendants.

Paul’s point? God’s plan to bestow unique privileges on certain people does not rest merely on the principle of physical descent OR human choices to follow/reject His will. His plan follows His choice to call out certain lines of people from within the wider group.

What about that last line from the above passage: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Doesn’t God love all people? Yes, of course He does. But in terms of choosing a specific line of people to pursue His plan with (a nation), God chose Jacob, not Esau. God still loves people who are born into Esau’s line. In fact, God gave Israel a specific law commanding them to love the descendants of Esau:

“Do not despise an Edomite, for the Edomites are related to you” (Deuteronomy 23:7).

The Edomites, Israel’s southern neighbors, were the descendants of Esau. God loves all people, even when His choice falls upon a certain line of people through whom to advance His plan upon the earth. Remember the overriding principle in this chapter: Man’s choices can ultimately only confirm God’s choices.

But the very fact that God chose Jacobs tribe over Esau’s raises a second question:


To the human mind, it seems unjust for God to bestow special privileges upon one group over another. Paul addresses the question of God’s justice in the following verses.

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For 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.” Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

He can harden one person’s heart, and open another person’s heart. He is God and no one can tell him what to do. Maybe you’ve seen the t-shirt for the mom with kids who are always asking why: “I’m the Mom; that’s why!” That’s pretty much Paul’s answer here. “I’m God; that’s why!” God gets to do whatever God wants to do.

**ANSWER #2: GOD GETS TO DO WHATEVER GOD WANTS TO DO.**

He did harden Pharaoh’s heart in the story of the plagues when Israel came out of Egypt. Now the story in Exodus ALSO SAYS that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So you have these two forces working simultaneously – God’s will and man’s will – but Paul is not trying to reconcile the two here in this chapter. He’s emphasizing divine sovereignty here. He is saying that man’s choices cannot throw God’s plan off track. And the Jewish rejection of Jesus has not thrown God’s plan off track. In fact, it has advanced it.

O.K. So God does whatever He wants to do. But that raises a third question:

**QUESTION #3: HOW CAN BLAME ME IF MY DECISION IS PRE-DETERMINED? ROMANS 9:19-21.**

Paul can hear the objection of a non-believer at this point: Hey, wait a minute. If everything depends on GOD’S CHOICE, not MY CHOICE, then how can He blame ME if I don’t believe in Him? Didn’t He predetermine my decision????

One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?” But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one 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 special purposes and some for common use? (9:19-21)

It’s interesting to read Paul closely. In places where he is dealing with human criticisms of God, accusations against God’s very character - Paul usually doesn’t respond to the specific accusation. He responds, instead, to the very notion of humans finding fault with God. How can a human find fault with God and still have a GOD?

**ANSWER #3: WE CAN’T ACCUSE GOD OF WRONGDOING AND STILL HAVE A GOD!**

For Paul, it is a logical fallacy to conclude that God is unjust; or God is evil; or God is partial; or God is unfair. GOD, by definition, cannot be evil or unjust or unholy and still be God! He’s basically saying: Don’t even go there. You’d be better off being an atheist than trying to hold on to the idea of an unjust deity. There is no category for an unjust God in Paul’s thinking. It is futility to even discuss the concept of an ‘evil God.’

Yet, we are still left with the question: How can God’s will and man’s will operate simultaneously? Doesn’t one negate the other? If God chooses, how can I really have a choice? This is the age-old question of the relationship between DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY and HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY. How do these two ideas work together?

To gain a full answer, we really need to see all of Romans 9-11 together. As we go
through these chapters, we will see how one section emphasizes GOD’S SOVEREIGN CHOICE, while another section emphasizes MAN’S RESPONSIBILITY TO DECIDE. Sovereignty is a word that means “kingship.” With reference to God, sovereignty means that He is the KING over everything and everyone, and He has the authority (sovereignty) to do as He pleases.

In the section here, Paul is clearly focusing on God’s sovereign choice. God is the potter and He does as He pleases with the entire batch of clay. At the end of this chapter, and all through chapter 10, Paul will focus on the human responsibility to choose.

But that leads to a fourth question – and now Paul is going to bring us back around to the original question: Does Israel’s rejection of Messiah-God Jesus mess up God’s sovereign plan of bringing salvation to the world? Here, Paul uses a hypothetical question, sort of a proposition.

**QUESTION #4: WHAT IF ISREAL’S REJECTION OF JESUS ADVANCED GOD’S PLAN? ROMANS 9:22-24.**

What if God, although 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 - even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

**ANSWER #4: ISRAEL’S REJECTION OF JESUS HAS OPENED THE DOOR FOR GOD’S MERCY TO BE RICHLY POURED OUT ON THE GENTILES.**

God knows what He is doing. Israel’s choice to reject Jesus only served to advance God’s plan by opening the door for the gospel to go to the Gentile world. Somehow, even human unbelief can fulfill God’s overall plan.

On the question of Divine Sovereignty and Human Free Will, it is important to pay close attention to Paul’s exact language in the above passage. Paul seems to say that God predestines people to salvation. But He does not say that God predestines people to hell.

Look closely at the following two lines from the above passage:

- “He bore with great patience the objects of His wrath – prepared for destruction.”
- “Objects of His mercy – whom He prepared in advance for glory.”

1. **God has to be patient with the objects of His wrath.** The idea of God being “patient” tells us that these people are somehow resisting Him. Why would you have to be patient with someone that has no say in the matter? A patient God presupposes some kind of real resistance on the part of those He is being patient with.

2. **The objects of His wrath “prepared for destruction.”** Paul did not write: Objects of wrath that HE prepared IN ADVANCE for destruction. The Bible is very careful to NEVER lay at God’s feet the responsibility for people rejecting Him and going to hell. Never! They are preparing themselves for destruction by resisting a patient God.

3. **The “objects of His mercy that HE PREPARED IN ADVANCE for glory.”** When it comes to the positive side of this salvation issue: God is clearly very active. HE prepares them IN ADVANCE for glory. The wording is different when it comes to the “objects of
wrath” and the “objects of glory.”

Never accuse God of injustice. And never accuse God of creating people for hell. Scripture is very careful to NEVER teach that God predestines people for hell.

**JEWISH REJECTION OF JESUS/GENTILE ACCEPTANCE OF JESUS. ROMANS 9:25-29.**

Now, how does all of this relate to the main question: What about the Jewish nation? Paul brings chapter 9 to a close with this point. When the Jews chose to say NO to Jesus, this only served to confirm God’s choice to open the door to a massive influx of Gentiles who chose to say YES to Jesus. Man’s choices confirmed God’s choice: His choice to open wide the gates of the kingdom to Gentiles.

Paul uses two quotes from the Old Testament to show that all along, God was planning to do this. Speaking of opening the door of salvation widely to Gentiles, he quotes from Hosea:

*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, “in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘children of the living God.’”*

What about the hardness of heart (unbelief) among the Jews? Also part of God’s choice, as Paul shows from the prophet Isaiah:

*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.”*

Man’s choices (Jewish rejection of Jesus – Gentile acceptance of Jesus) only served to confirm (fit in with) God’s choices. It was all foretold by God through the prophets.

As this 9th chapter concludes, Paul turns the table and allows the emphasis to fall on man’s side of the equation: Israel’s choice to NOT believe in Jesus.

**THE JEWISH DECISION TO NOT ACCEPT GOD’S MERCY. ROMANS 9:30-33.**

*What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.”*

Note that last line: “the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.” This is the side of human responsibility to choose to follow Jesus. The Jewish people stumbled over “the stumbling stone.” That stumbling stone was the death of Jesus for their sins. They stumbled over the concept of God’s grace and mercy, choosing instead to pursue salvation
by means of their own good works and religious rituals. The Gentiles, on the other hand, streamed into the kingdom grateful for God’s amazing grace toward sinners.

The Jews choose to reject Jesus (stumble over the stone). The Gentiles chose to accept Jesus (the stone, Jesus, became the object of their faith).

Man’s choices, on a national level (Jew/Gentile) only served to confirm God’s choices. His plan has not been thwarted by human unbelief; instead, His plan is advancing exactly as He intended it to. Paul is saddened by the unbelief of his fellow Jews, and he will continue to strive with all of his energy to bring them to salvation. At the same time, he is confident that God’s plan is moving forward right on schedule, and he will continue to offer the good news of salvation to the many willing Gentiles who are receptive to the grace of God, shown through Jesus Christ.

If you step back from this chapter and draw a deep breath, and clear away the fog, it basically says this:

Israel rejected Messiah-God . . . but this only served to advance God’s sovereign plan to bring salvation to the Gentile world.

More generally, I’d put this message of this chapter like this:

Human choices can only serve to fulfill divinely predetermined plans.

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY – HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY.**

Unlike any other portion of Scripture, Romans chapters 9 and 10 raise the age-old question of the relationship between Divine Sovereignty (God’s choice) and Human Responsibility (man’s choice). This has been a constant source of debate (and frustration!) for centuries. How can both of these ideas be true at the same time? They seem to be mutually exclusive. If God chooses first, how do I really have a choice? On the other hand, if the choice is up to me, then how does God’s choice really make a difference?

The debate of this issue has divided Protestant Churches since the time of the Reformation. Today, the two opposing positions are usually referred to as Arminianism (emphasizes human choice) and Calvinism (emphasizes God’s sovereignty). These two positions are named after two men who argued strongly one way or the other in the 17th century: Jacobus Arminius and John Calvin.

Today, you might here of “the 5 points of Calvinism.” You may hear the acrostic TULIP to summarize Calvin’s views:

**T** – Total depravity. Sin renders man incapable of choosing to believe in Jesus. The gift of belief must first be given to the depraved sinner before they can be saved. Faith is gift.

**U** – Unconditional election. God chooses people who will be saved without any reference to their future ‘decision.’ Divine election depends entirely on God, not on man.

**L** – Limited atonement. Christ death on the cross had atoning impact only on those whom God elected unto salvation. He did not died for “all.”

**I** – Irresistible grace. Those whom God calls to Himself will not be able to resist His calling. His grace is not capable of being thwarted by the human will.

**P** – Perseverance of the saints. Those who are saved are saved permanently. Once saved,
always saved. A saved person cannot exercise their will to become ‘unsaved.’

Obviously the above acrostic covers a lot more ground than Romans 9 and 10. This theological position is a summation of what Calvin (and modern-day ‘Calvinists) see taught throughout Scripture. Yet, you can see from the above list that the emphasis throughout lies on God’s side of the equation. God is responsible for man’s salvation from start to finish. The human being really has nothing to offer to the equation.

Some very strong Calvinists maintain a position known as “double-predestination,” which means that God not only predestines some to salvation; but He also predestines others to damnation. Many moderate Calvinists shy away from this concept of double-predestination.

Jacobus Arminius emphasized the opposite of Calvin. He emphasized the human side of the equation. Briefly, here is the Arminian reply to the five points of Calvinism:

T – (Total depravity): Man is fallen, but the fall does not render man’s will (ability to believe) completely inoperative. We still can exercise our will to believe, or not.

U – (Unconditional election): God’s choice coincides with man’s choice. Some Arminians would say that God’s election is merely a reflection of what He sees in advance that man will do. Others maintain that God’s choice is more real, more active, and that it fits with man’s choice in some mysterious way, both being ‘real.’

L – (Limited atonement): Arminians strongly reject the concept of limited atonement, arguing that Jesus died for the sins of ALL people. His atoning work is valid for all, and offered to all, even if it is rejected by many.

I – (Irresistible grace): Man has the choice to resist God’s grace. God’s grace is powerful, yet it does not render man’s will incapable of resisting it or, ultimately, rejecting it.

P – (Perseverance of the saints): A person can lose his/her salvation by choosing to NOT believe even after salvation. A saved individual only remains ‘saved’ by continuing to chose to have faith in Christ.

The above is a very rough summary of the two varying positions. When you study the doctrinal positions of modern Protestant churches, you will find that this issue is a key dividing point. It is good for you to be aware of this whole debate and, as a maturing Christian, to come to some basic position of your own in these matters.

That having been said, where do I (Bob) stand on these issues? I am a Cal-Arminian (a blend) . . . with a strong belief in ANTINOMY.

First, I’ll give you my take on the five points above and my Cal-Arminian viewpoint:

T – I lean toward Arminianism. The fall of man did not render the will incapable of belief. The will of man requires divine aid to respond, but the divine aid of the Spirit and the human operation of the will work in cooperation with each other.

U – I lean toward Calvinism. Scripture teaches that God chooses people based solely on His decision to dispense mercy, “not depending on the man who wills or the man who runs” (Romans 9). In other words, God’s ‘sovereignty’ is very real, even if it is a mystery as to how it fits in with human responsibility.

L – I strongly reject the idea of ‘limited atonement.’ Scripture repeatedly emphasizes both that Christ died for all and that God desires all to come to a saving knowledge of Christ. Thus, I lean here toward Arminianism.
I – I believe that divine grace is resistible. Man can choose to reject God’s offer of salvation, and the appeal of the Holy Spirit. This would tilt me toward Arminianism.

P – I believe that once a person has been saved, they are ‘sealed’ by the Holy Spirit, and it is not possible for them to ‘lose’ their salvation. Thus, I lean toward Calvinism on this point.

So . . . I am a blend – a Cal-Arminian. It would take more space than I want to give here to list all of the Scripture passages in support of my leanings on the above points. But at least this gives you a basic feel for where I land on these issues.

But secondly, I want to address the more important issue of ANTINOMY. An “antinomy” is when two ideas are logically opposed. I believe that both divine sovereignty and human responsibility are true at the same time. I also believe that it is beyond our reasoning ability (our mental capacity) to fully understand HOW they fit together. I believe both ideas are real and true, even if they defy our logical ability to piece them together. We are dealing with a true antinomy that I must accept. But how can I, as a Christian, accept something that defies human logic?

Because we’re in way over our heads! We’re dealing with GOD ideas, and we are humans. We are admitting that there are some things in our universe that are beyond the finite human mind to grasp.

It is a bit like an old computer trying to run some new software. The old computer just doesn’t have the speed and memory to handle the new software. The old computer’s operating system is just not up to the task.

Our logical capacity to understand the things of God is limited. We are finite. God is infinite. Aside from His thoughts, plans and purposes being infinite, He is also not limited to time and space. So even talking about His decisions preceding our decisions in time is virtually meaningless, since God operates outside of our time and space dimensions. Because God is essentially infinite, and we are finite, there are some things that we will never be able to fully understand on this side of eternity. The relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is one of those issues.

I often use the illustration of the two sides of a coin. Pick up a coin and try to look at both sides of it at the same time. You can’t do it. You can see the head, or the tail, but you can’t see both at the same time. But both sides of the coin are real, and equally valid. It is just that the eyes of my head are set in their sockets such that I cannot see clearly both sides at the same time. So, while I am studying the head-side of the coin in great detail, I am blind to the tail-side. Is the tail side still there? Yes. But I must take it “by faith” that it is there, because I can’t see it while studying the head-side.

While I study Romans 9, I am looking at the “head-side” of the coin – divine sovereignty. While I am looking in great detail at this side of the equation, I must take it by faith that Romans 10 is ‘the other side of the coin.’ I’ll look at chapter 10 next, and we’ll see how strong the emphasis is on human responsibility. And . . . at that point, I will have to take it by faith that divine sovereignty (Romans 9) is still at work.

They both are working together. I just can’t figure it all out, logically, in my present finite mind. I can’t see both sides of this coin with my finite eyes!

This is why Paul ends Romans 9 – 11 with a statement about how some mysteries of God are “beyond figuring out.”

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known
the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36).

There’s an interesting word picture tucked away here. It’s in the phrase “his paths are beyond tracing out” (v.33). In the New American Standard Bible, this is translated: His ways are unfathomable.

In ancient times, when sailors would go out to see, they did not have sophisticated equipment for determining the depth of the sea. Yet, it was very important to know how deep the water was at any given point, so as not to run the ship aground. So, a certain person on board the ship was responsible for checking the “fathoms.” They did this by using sound waves! They would take a stick and hit the side of the wooden ship. Then they would listen very carefully to see how long it took for the sound wave to bounce back up off the ocean floor. By becoming expert at listening for these sound waves, the fathom-taker could advise the captain of the ship as to the approximate depth of the sea at any given point. Three fathoms, captain. Six fathoms, captain. And so forth.

But at a certain point, this archaic method of determining ocean depths would stop working, because the sound wave would go down so deep that it would not bounce back up for the fathom-taker to hear. He would say to the captain: Unfathomable, sir! We are out so deep that I can’t tell you how deep we are!

Some of God’s ‘ways’ are so deep that I can’t tell you how deep they are! This is true for the question of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This is beyond our ability to comprehend. This is an ANTINOMY!

By faith, I choose to believe that God is bigger than I am. I choose to believe that because He is infinite, and I am finite, there will be some things about Him and about His ways that I will never quite ‘get.’

One final note: I am content to leave these two issues “in tension” in my mind because Scripture leaves them “in tension” on its pages. You will often find the ideas of divine sovereignty and human responsibility resting side by side in the pages of Scripture, with no attempt to resolves, or explain away, the logical tension. Romans 9 and 10 are the perfect example. Chapter 9 strong emphasizes God’s side of the deal. Chapter 10 strongly emphasizes man’s side of the deal. There is no attempt to fit the two together into a neat package. Instead, chapter 11 tells us that some things are unfathomable!

D. L. Moody put the matter this way. Imagine humanity driving down a highway. They pass by a sign that says on the front side: “Exit here to find the way to eternal life.” Many choose to follow that sign and take the exit.

Once they take the exit and turn around, on the backside of that sign it reads: “Chosen from before the foundation of the world.”

Both are true. Maybe someday we’ll have the capacity to see both sides of that sign at the same time. For now, I leave them in tension. I am in unfathomable waters.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

For other places where the two concepts are found side-by-side, take a look at the
And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls (Joel 2:32).

At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:25-30).

For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,” and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this they were also appointed (1Peter 2:6-8).

While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them. But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: “LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?” For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, “HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM.” These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God (John 12:36-43).