Salvation — God's choice or man's?

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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

Introduction

A couple of responses are commonly offered to the seemingly unfair doctrine of divine election.
Far from involving his sovereign, unconditional choice of specific individuals, God's election supposedly:

1. **Is general and corporate rather than specifying individuals**.
   God specifies the criteria or conditions that make a person elect, namely faith in Christ.
   In other words, the criteria (faith) determines the selection.
   Or, he has chosen the Church as a whole rather than the individuals who comprise the Church.
   Or, Christ is God's chosen and beloved Son, and all those "in him" by faith are chosen and loved too.

2. **Does specify individuals, but is based on his foreknowledge**.
   God knows in advance who will respond to the gospel and who will not.

Additionally, Paul's discussion in Romans 9 – 11 is said to relate to national salvation and historical roles rather that the salvation of specific individuals.

A general response first:
The above responses actually bring the ultimate choice back to man.
In Point 1, God chooses all those who make the right choice.
Similarly in Point 2, God peers into the future to see who will, all by himself, make the right choice.
Both approaches take the choice away from God and bring it back to man; both make God's decision contingent on the human response. It is then ultimately not God's choice at all, but man's.
Even in Point 2 God's choice is dependent on man's, logically and causally (although not temporally).
Both notions deny the Bible's teaching that God is the one who chooses.

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Both implicitly deny God's absolute sovereignty, and both elevate man's capabilities and autonomy. Surely, the whole point of stating that God chooses from eternity past (Eph 1:4; 2Tim 1:9; Rev 17:8) is to emphasize that the choice is ultimately his. God's choice precedes ours by a very wide margin!

Election in the writings of John

Rather than examining Paul's theology, we shall begin with what the apostle John wrote and recorded. Divine election and predestination are emphasized in both his Gospel and the book of Revelation.

John 6:35-40:

35 *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*
36 *But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.*
37 *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*
38 *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*
39 *And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.*
40 *For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*

John 6:44, 65:

44 *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day."*

65 *And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."*

John 10:14-16:

14 *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,* 15 *just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*
16 *And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."*

John 10:26-30 (ASV):

26 *But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep.*
27 *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:*
28 *and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.*
29 *My Father, who hath given them unto me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*
30 *I and the Father are one.*[2]

[2] John 10:30: Jesus is one in purpose with the Father in saving the elect. But even more, he has divine power to do so. The Jews fully understood him to be claiming equality with God, picking up stones to stone him (Jn 10:31-33).

Revelation 17:8 (my translation):

> *"… And those who dwell on the earth, <u>whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world</u>, will be astonished when they see the beast that once was, and now is not, and yet will be."*

Several principles from the above Scripture references:

- Despite widespread Jewish unbelief, Jesus knows that each and every one of those given to him by the Father will come to him and believe on him for salvation (Jn 6:37a).
- No one can come to Jesus unless drawn and enabled by the Father (Jn 6:44, 65).
- Jesus will accept all come to him, for all such are those whom the Father has given to him (Jn 6:37b-38).
- None who come to Jesus will be lost; both Father and Son preserve them unto eternal life. (Jn 6:39; 10:28-30)
- Jesus knows his sheep intimately; for them he died (Jn 10:14-15).
  Others who belong to him (and for whom he died) will be gathered in; they too will listen to him, and there will be one flock (Jn 10:16).
- Those who persist in unbelief do so because they are not Jesus' sheep (Jn 10:26).
  In Revelation, those whose names have not been written from eternity past in the book of life will marvel at the Beast's return (Rev 17:8).
  The implication being that God's people <u>have</u> had their name written there from all eternity.
- Despite all this, Jesus graciously holds forth the free offer of the gospel; all are invited to come to him. See John 1:12; 3:15-16; 6:35, 40; Revelation 22:17.

We have in John's Gospel every one of the so-called "five points of Calvinism":

1. Human inability to come to Christ apart from the Father's drawing and enabling (Jn 6:44, 65).
2. The Father's choice of some who are given to Christ for him to save (Jn 6:37; cf. 17:2).
3. Jesus' substitutionary death for those whom the Father has given to him — for the "sheep" (Jn 10:15).
4. The irresistible calling (drawing) of the elect (Jn 6:37; 10:16) — through the gospel and by the Holy Spirit.
5. The divine preservation (and the perseverance) of the elect (Jn 6:39; 10:28-30).

Election in Paul's epistles

Romans 8:29-30:

> [29] *For those whom he <u>foreknew</u> he also <u>predestined</u> to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*
> [30] *And those whom he predestined he also <u>called</u>, and those whom he called he also <u>justified</u>, and those whom he justified he also <u>glorified</u>.*

Here we have the so-called golden chain of salvation:
God has foreknown and predestined his elect people to become like Jesus.
God foreknew → predestined → called → justified → glorified.
He foreknows (foreloves) them, and he has predetermined the final outcome.
The steps for accomplishing this include:

- The effectual <u>calling</u> of the elect through his word (the gospel) and the work of the Spirit.
- Full <u>justification</u> through faith in Jesus.
- Final <u>glorification</u>.

From this we can ascertain:

1. God's election pertains to individuals: "those whom he foreknew, predestined, etc."
2. The final outcome ("glorified") is absolutely certain.
   Glorified means that believers will be transformed so as to share in Christ's glory (Rom 8:17; 2Cor 3:18).
   This process begins already in this life but will be perfected posthumously in heaven.
   Paul employs the past tense to emphasize its certainty; God will complete his work in us.

Romans 9 – 11:
This section of Romans is crucial for understanding Paul's concept of divine election.
Paul is discussing why so many Israelites of his day disbelieve and are cut off from Christ as Savior (9:1-5).
Paul devotes three whole chapters to Israel's unbelief:

- 9:1-6a shows Paul's major concern:
  Why are so many in Israel cursed and cut off from salvation in Christ (9:3)?
  Have God's promises concerning Israel failed (9:6a)?
- 9:6b-29: Examines God's sovereign action in relation to individuals.
- 9:30 – 10:21: Examines Israel's own fault and responsibility for unbelief.
- 11:1-10: An elect remnant of faithful Israelites proves that God has not rejected his people.
  In fact, God's saving of a remnant has been the norm, at least since Elijah's day.
- 11:11-32: Israel's fall has enabled the Gentiles to join God's people.
  God's promises to the nation may yet be finally realized in a future general conversion of the Jews.
- 11:33-36: God's ways are ultimately unfathomable; no one can advise or critique him; he is altogether free to act as he wants.

As noted earlier, many Christians view election in terms of God's general choice rather than his specific election of individuals — for example, that he has chosen the Church as a body rather than the individuals who comprise the Church.

In similar vein, some scholars claim that Paul's concern in Romans 9 – 11 is merely with national salvation and historical roles: Jacob = Israel vs. Esau = Edom, etc.[3]
This is indeed the concern in Malachi 1:2-3, which Paul references in 9:13.
And it is certainly true that God's promises relate to the nation as a whole (9:4-5). Paul seems to anticipate their final fulfillment in an as-yet-future large-scale turning of the Jews to their Messiah (11:11-32).

Yet we need to realize that salvation and eternal destinies are being discussed, not historical roles.
See Romans 9:3, 27; 10:1, 9-10, 13; 11:14, 26.
The discussion concerns Israel's unbelief, and in 9:3 Paul confesses that he would happily be cut off from Christ and "accursed" in their stead.

Our remaining focus in this section will be on Paul's apologia in Romans 9:6-29 and 11:1-10 relating to the problem of Israel's unbelief.
In Romans 9:6-29 Paul notes the following:

1. Paul is defending his view that God's promises to Israel have not failed (9:6a).
   He begins by noting that not all Israelites are real Israelites (9:6b).[4]
2. The example of Ishmael and Isaac shows that physical descent was never the determining factor.
   Rather, God's call and promise are what makes one a true descendant of Abraham and child of God (9:7-9).
3. The example of Jacob and Esau confirms this; God unconditionally chose Jacob and rejected Esau (9:10-13).
4. A hypothetical objector might suggest that God is unjust to arbitrarily choose and reject (9:14).
   Paul answers by citing Exodus 33:19: God shows mercy to whoever he chooses (9:15).
   Implicit in Paul's answer is that no one has any claim to God's mercy; all stand condemned before him.
5. Paul draws from this a general principle:
   Salvation depends solely on God's mercy, **not man's desire or effort** (9:16).
   What could be plainer: God first chooses us, then draws us through the gospel and by his Spirit, granting us regeneration, faith, repentance, etc. All good desires on our part are his gifts and working.
6. Paul goes further: God raised up Pharaoh for the very purpose of displaying in or through him his power and goodness (9:17).
   Paul draws another general principle:
   So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills (9:18).
7. The hypothetical objector might again suggest that God is unfair (9:19):
   How can God hold people accountable when even their unbelief is a part of his will?
   Paul basically answers that God, as our Creator, is entirely free to act as he sees fit (9:20-21).
   The very thought of the clay pot talking back to the Potter — asking him why he made him thus — is really quite ludicrous (9:20).[5]
   But importantly, human "freewill" forms no part of Paul's answer.

[3] Scholars holding this view include James D.G. Dunn, N.T. Wright, and John Lennox. So did the eminent Wesleyan commentator Adam Clarke (1760-1832).
[4] Elsewhere Paul states that true Israelites are those who are spiritually circumcised (Rom 2:28-29; Php 3:3; Col 2:11-12), those who emulate Abraham's walk and faith (Rom 4:11-12, 16).
[5] Paul likely has in mind here some rhetorical questions that the Lord asks his people in Isaiah, which basically amount to this:
Is it right for the clay to critique the Potter?
In Isaiah 29:16, the pot tells the Potter: "You didn't really make me." Or it openly criticizes him: "He doesn't know what he's doing."
In Isaiah 45:9, the clay sarcastically challenges the Potter: "What on earth are you making? Your work displays a real lack of skill; it is almost as if you had no hands at all." (I have paraphrased these criticisms.)

Paul notes that the "vessels of wrath" are indeed "prepared for destruction" for the display of God's wrath and power (9:22). Just as Pharaoh was (9:17).

The display of God's wrath serves to magnify his grace toward those "prepared beforehand for glory" — those he chooses and calls and saves (9:23-24).

8. Paul's focus now shifts to God's grace shown to the Gentiles (9:25-26):
   He quotes Hosea 2:23 and 1:10. In context the prophet is referring to the restoration of Israel, but Paul finds in them the principle that God delights to save even those who are "not my people" — hence God's calling of the Gentiles into his family.
9. Conversely, only a small remnant from the great multitude of Israelites will be saved, as Isaiah also foretold (9:27-29; cf. Isaiah 10:22-23; 1:9).

Romans 11:1-10 can be summarized as follows:

An elect remnant of faithful Israelites proves that God has not rejected his people.

1. Paul himself is one such (11:1).
   But not just Paul; none was rejected of those whom he foreknew (foreloved, 11:2a).
2. Even in the darkest of times God has preserved for himself a faithful remnant (11:2b-4).
3. So too, in Paul's day there is a remnant whose members God has chosen (11:5).
   His choice of such is not on the basis of any works on their part (11:6).
   God's choice apart from any works agrees with what Paul had discussed earlier — God's choice of Jacab before birth (9:11), and that God has mercy on whom he will (9:15-16).
4. Israel as a whole failed to gain what it so earnestly sought — a right standing with God (11:7a; cf. 10:3).
   The elect remnant within Israel obtained salvation, but the rest were hardened (11:7b).
   Can it be any clearer that God's sovereign choice pertains to individuals?
5. Nor is hardening merely passive (11:8).
   Just as God actively hardened Pharaoh (9:17), so has he hardened the unbelieving in Israel.
   Paul cites from both Isaiah 29:10 and Deuteronomy 29:4:
   The Israelites' spiritual dullness has continued from Isaiah's day down to Paul's day.
6. Paul now prays for judgment on the Jews of his day who have rejected Christ (11:9-10).
   Like Peter in Acts 1:20, Paul cites from Psalm 69 — an imprecatory or cursing psalm.
   (Such psalms ask the Lord to justly punish the wicked, especially covenant apostates within Israel.)

Ephesians 1

God chose us in Christ from all eternity, to be holy and blameless in his sight (1:4).

It was in love that he predestined us, to be his adopted sons through Christ, in accordance with his sovereign purpose (1:5).

All this is to the praise of his glorious grace given to us in Christ (1:6).

In Christ we have redemption and forgiveness "according to the riches of his grace" (1:7).

In Christ "we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, … to the praise of his glory." (1:11-12)

From this last point, God's choice and predestination of his people is merely a part of his foreordination of all things.

Ephesians 2

Paul here notes that all by nature are dead in sin (2:1), "children of wrath" (2:3).

"But God, being rich in mercy, … made us alive together with Christ … and raised us up with him …" (2:4-6).

We are saved by grace through faith. "And this is not you own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (2:8-9)

For we are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand …" (2:10).

In summary, God takes the initiative at every stage:

- He raises those who are spiritually dead.
- Faith itself is his gift, so that no one may boast.
- And the good works we do in response are all foreordained!

2 Timothy 1:9 (NASB):

> *[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,*

Salvation through the word

The proclamation of the gospel is God's appointed means to call people to himself.

How does God accomplish this?

A faithful preacher, focusing on God's work in Christ on behalf of sinners, calls his hearers to faith and repentance — to turn from sin and appropriate for themselves God's free offer of forgiveness in his Son. God <u>commands</u> all to repent (Ac 17:30), and so the preacher urges his hearers to believe in order to be reconciled to God (2Cor 5:20).

Yet while this outward call is extended to everyone, it remains ineffective unless accompanied by a powerful internal call from the Holy Spirit. This difference explains why, often, only a few people in a group respond to the proclaimed word. Concerning Lydia we read (Acts 16:14, EHV):

The Lord opened her heart to pay close attention to what Paul was saying.

That there are indeed two distinct "calls" — the one external and general and the other internal and particular and "effectual" (so-called because it infallibly converts) — can be seen from 1 Corinthians 1:23-24:

> [23] *but <u>we preach Christ crucified</u>, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,*
> [24] *but to <u>those who are called</u>, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*.[6]

New birth (or regeneration) is the work of God's Spirit (Jn 3:3, 5; Tit 3:5). His action is vital because people by nature are spiritually dead — wholly unwilling and unable to come to Christ for salvation (Eph 2:1-10; Jn 3:19-20; 5:40; 6:44, 65). People are innately hostile toward God (Rom 8:7; Col 1:21). But with the gift of new birth God makes rebellious people compliant (Dt 30:6; Jer 31:33; Eze 36:26-27).

[6] Here are further references to God's effectual call of those whom he has chosen: Romans 8:28-30; 9:24; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Galatians 1:15; Ephesians 1:18; 4:1, 4; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 1:10; Jude 1:1; Revelation 17:14.

But the point is this:

The word (whether heard or read) is the means by which the Holy Spirit regenerates people.

The Spirit takes the written word that he himself inspired and shines the light of its truth into people's hearts, granting spiritual illumination and new birth. Christ is revealed as the all-sufficient Savior, which in turn engenders true faith.

The agency of the word is affirmed in the following verses:

- *[God] gave give us birth <u>through the word of truth</u> …* (James 1:18, my translation)
- [23] *For you have been born again, not from perishable seed but from imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*

  [25] *… And this is the word that was preached to you.*

  (1 Peter 1:23, 25, EHV)

The Holy Spirit employs the preached word to convert all those whom God has predestined:

> [4] *For we know, brothers loved by God, <u>that he has chosen you</u>,* [5] *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. …*
> (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5)

Faithful preachers can be encouraged by the fact that, through their proclamation, God will irresistibly draw to himself his elect people for whom Jesus died:

Jesus declared: *"All that the Father gives me <u>will</u> come to me …"* (John 6:37)

And to Paul he said:

> [9] *… "Do not be afraid, but keep on speaking, and do not be silent.*
> [10] *For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, because I have many people in this city."*
> (Acts 18:9-10, EHV)

Though not yet Christians, many people in Corinth already belonged to Jesus because he had died for them. Through Paul's proclamation these people would be irresistibly drawn to Christ as Savior. God's predestination of individuals unto salvation (Rom 8:30) therefore guaranteed the success of his evangelistic efforts.

Thus encouraged, Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months (Ac 18:11) — longer than he stayed in any other city except Ephesus.

The gospel faithfully proclaimed is God's "power" by which he saves (Rom 1:16; 1Cor 1:18).

God's word is "living and active" — it's sharper than any sword and penetrates to our inner recesses (Heb 4:12).

It's a "hammer" that shatters rocks (Jer 23:29).

It accomplishes all that God intends (Isa 55:11).

God's word accompanied by his Spirit supernaturally quickens and converts, paralleling his action both in creation and in raising Jesus from the dead (Eph 2:5; cf. Jn 3:5; Rom 4:17; 2Cor 5:17).

The remainder of this document will focus on divine foreknowledge.

God's foreknowledge

We will now proceed to critique the notion that God only chooses those whom he foresees will believe.

1. This view is an attempt to take the choice away from God and bring it back to man.
   It makes God's decision contingent on the (future) human response. It is then not ultimately God's choice at all, for his choice becomes dependent on man's, logically and causally (although not temporally).
   This notion makes a nonsense of the Bible's teaching that God is the one who chooses.
   As noted earlier, the whole point of stating that God chooses people from eternity past (Eph 1:4; 2Tim 1:9; Rev 17:8) is to emphasize that salvation is ultimately his choice — his choice precedes ours.
2. It is wrong because its view of the future is faulty.
   God knows the future not because he peers into it to see what's going to happen by itself.
   Rather, he foreknows all things because he has foreordained all things. The future is predetermined.
   All things, significant and trivial, are foreordained — a sparrow's fall (Mt 10:29); a dice's outcome (Pr 16:33); personal disabilities (Ex 4:11; Jn 9:2-3); a prophet's call (Jer 1:5); a king's decisions (Pr 21:1; Ezr 1:1; 6:22); even sinful actions (Gen 50:20; Ps 105:25; Ac 4:28), though without making God the author of such sins.
   God's predestination of individuals is merely a part of his foreordination of all things (Eph 1:11).
3. It makes God's choice dependent on human works.
   In this scheme Isaac and Jacob were chosen because they were, in some way, intrinsically "better" than their (unbelieving) siblings. Somehow or other they made the sensible choice to believe, and God in turn chose them.
   But that's wrong! There is nothing inherent in anybody that makes God choose one and reject another.
   For Paul, the basis of God's eternal choice is grace and not works (Rom 11:5; 2Tim 1:9).
   And grace and works are totally antithetical principles (Rom 11:6).
   In Adam all of us are disqualified from God's favor. So when God chooses to save, he does so not on the basis of merit, but of grace. This has to be so! He extends his favor to the wholly underserving.[7]
   Indeed, he delights to do so (Rom 9:25-26). And because his choice takes no account of anything inherent in the person, God is entirely free to save whomever he chooses.
   Paul illustrates this principle with Jacob vs. Esau (9:10-13).
   God chose without regard for anything inherent in these twins — before their birth, before either one was capable of good or bad thoughts or actions[8]:

   > [11] *For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad —*
   > *in order that God's purpose in election might stand, not because of works but because of*
   > *him who calls —* [12] *Rebekah was told, "The older shall serve the younger."*
   > (Romans 9:11-12, my translation)

   Nothing at all distinguished the twins; neither had done anything good or bad; God chose solely in accordance with his own will.
   And while all this might seem unfair (9:14), it illustrates the principle first revealed to Moses that God has mercy on those whom he chooses to show mercy (9:15; cf. Ex 33:19).

[7] Note that not only is grace the basis of God's dealings with sinners in time, but it's also the basis of his eternal (predestinating) choice of these same individuals which leads him to call and draw them to himself.
This of course implies that God from eternity past viewed us as sinners in need of salvation. And indeed, that's just what Paul affirms: God chose us in Christ from all eternity (Eph 1:4, 11; 2Tim 1:9; cf. Jn 6:37).
[8] God's choice was actually made long before they were born — in eternity past.

The fact that salvation depends on God's mercy gives him the right and freedom to choose its recipients.[9]
God's choice takes no account of "works" of any sort — all human desire and effort are ruled out (9:16).
Having discussed God's rejection of Ishmael and Esau, Paul turns now to the example of Pharaoh:
God sovereignly raised up Pharaoh for his own purposes (9:17).
Paul now restates the principle to include reprobation (Romans 9:18, literal translation):
So then, to whom [God] wants he shows mercy, but whom he wants he hardens.

4. It is sometimes claimed that Pharaoh's hardening was ultimately his own doing and that God merely knew what Pharaoh was like and how he would respond; God knew beforehand that he would rebel against his command to let Israel go.
   Response: Yes, God knew that Pharaoh would refuse and rebel (Ex 3:19).
   And yes, sometimes Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart (Ex 8:15, 32; 9:34).
   Yet even before Pharaoh could respond, God had declared his intention to harden him so that he would not listen or obey (Ex 4:21; 7:3-4).
   And his self-hardening, or his simply becoming hardened, along with his refusal to listen, are said to be the result of God's prior word (Ex 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19).
   God had determined his hardening so that his own saving wonders could be displayed (Ex 9:16; 10:1-2).
   Furthermore, what was true of Pharaoh was true of the Egyptians as a whole (Ps 105:25; Ex 14:4, 17-18).
5. That foreknowledge cannot mean mere foresight — that God simply foresees who is going to believe — is evident from the state of our human condition apart from God's grace:
   No one is able to believe or come to Christ apart from God's drawing and enabling grace (Jn 6:44, 65).
   Such is our innate hostility and enmity towards God that we cannot and will not come to him ourselves (Rom 3:10-11; 8:7; Col 1:21). God, in salvation, must raise the spiritually dead (Eph 2:1-5).
   Faith and repentance are necessarily the fruit and outworking of the new birth that he himself imparts (Jn 1:12-13; 3:3, 5; Ac 13:48; Tit 3:5; Jas 1:18).
   Hence Paul's declaration that salvation does not depend on man's will or effort (Rom 9:16).
   Moreover, those who come to Jesus are those who have already been given to him by the Father (Jn 6:37).
6. What, then, should we make of God's "foreknowledge" (the Greek noun *prognōsis*, employed by Peter in Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:2), and his foreknowing of individuals (the related verb *proginōskō*, used in Romans 8:29 and 11:2 and in 1 Peter 1:20)?
   In answer, consider the following:
   In Acts 2:23, God's foreknowledge is connected with his "fixed purpose" (literal Greek; cf. Ac 3:18; 4:28).
   In Romans and 1 Peter, God's foreknowledge/foreknowing refers to his *fore-loving* and *fore-choosing*.
   In the Old Testament the verb "to know" (*yāḏaʿ*) often carries the special sense of knowing intimately (Gen 4:1) and approvingly (Ps 1:6; 139:1), so as to choose and set apart (Gen 18:19; Jer 1:5; Am 3:2).
   To foreknow is therefore to forelove. Says Paul, it was "in love [that] he predestined us …" (Eph 1:4-5).
   Paul notes that God did not reject his people "whom he foreknew" — those he foreloved (Rom 11:1).[10]
   (For further comments on foreknowledge as foreloving, see Appendix 1.)

[9] The point being that God is under no obligation to save any, yet he chooses to save some.
[10] Relevant to this whole discussion is Jesus' intimate knowledge of his "sheep": each individual sheep he knows, calls, and leads by name; for each one he died; each and every one he preserves unto eternal life (Jn 10:3-4, 11, 14-15, 27-28). And he owns and knows other sheep that are yet to be called (Jn 10:16; cf. Ac 18:9-10).
Christ was himself "foreknown" from all eternity (1Pet 1:20) — chosen as the Mediator and loved by the Father.

7. Consideration of God's sovereignty in salvation leads Paul to magnify his extravagant grace (Eph 1:3-12).
   Paul viewed himself as the foremost of sinners, but also an example to any who would consider God's saving invitation — God's grace can extend to the most undeserving (1Tim 1:13-16).
   As to choice, Paul is absolutely clear:
   Even before his birth God had set him apart, and then by his grace he had called him to service (Gal 1:15).

Predestination is good news!

The doctrine of predestination is great news for those who know their own spiritual inability.
God converts whomever he chooses, so we can ask him for help.[11]
True faith is reliance upon God to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves:
To join us to Jesus, so that we are identified with him. To apply Jesus' redemptive work to us so that we are declared sinless and viewed as perfect in his sight (Rom 4:5-8; 8:1; 2Cor 5:21; Php 3:9).
All we need to do is ask for help:
Those trusting in him will not be disappointed; all who call upon him will be saved (Rom 10:11-13).
As David declares in Psalm 9:10 (my translation):

> *And those who know your name will put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.*

To know God's name is to know his character — his goodness, love and mercy (Ex 34:5-7).
Knowing his character engenders faith!

[11] The converse of course is this: The fact that God is completely sovereign ought to make those who resist him tremble. Why so? Because their stubborn unbelief is an indication that their "names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world" (Rev 17:8). Reprobation is a terrible doctrine, but perhaps one that needs to be proclaimed more in today's world.

Appendix 1: The meaning of foreknowledge

The following is from Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*.
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House (5th printing, 1988).
Excerpt from page 926, concerning the significance of God's foreknowledge:

> Nor is the argument that God's foreordaining is based upon his foreknowledge persuasive. For the [Hebrew verb] יָדַע (*yada'*), which seems to lie behind Paul's use of προγινώσκω, signifies more than an advance knowledge or precognition. It carries the connotation of a very positive and intimate relationship. It suggests looking with favor upon or loving someone, and is even used of sexual relations.[67] What is in view, then, is not a neutral advance knowledge of what someone will do, but an affirmative choice of that person. Against this Hebraic background it appears likely that the references to foreknowledge in Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:1-2 are presenting foreknowledge not as the grounds for predestination, but as a confirmation of it.
>
> [67] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 394; Jacobs and Krienke, "Foreknowledge," pp. 692-93.

Appendix 2: Election vs. Reprobation

Election and Reprobation are not completely parallel.
In election, God intervenes in a person's life. When the gospel comes to such a person, God graciously grants and imparts to him the gifts of new birth, faith, and repentance, so that he can and will believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior (e.g., Jn 6:37; Ac 16:14).
In reprobation, God leaves a person to himself. By nature, all of us are spiritually dead and blind and hostile to God (Eph 2:1; Col 1:21) — wholly unable and unwilling to believe in Jesus in order to be saved (Jn 6:44, 65). This is true of all of us if left to our own "freewill".
Such persons, in response to the gospel, are necessarily hardened. Nor is such hardening entirely passive, for, as with Pharaoh, God actively hardens people as well.
Romans 9:18 (literal translation):
So then, to whom [God] wants he shows mercy, but whom he wants he hardens.

Having said all this, there does seem to be the same degree of ultimacy with regard to God's choice or rejection. For there are some "whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world" (Rev 17:8).

See also the following YouTube video:
Richard Caldwell: *Double Predestination Explained*; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJEKjAPOQaI.

Appendix 3: Have Calvinists misunderstood Paul?

Many Christians object to the Reformed (Calvinist) interpretation of Romans 9.
They object to the notion that salvation is 100% God's work — not only in relation to the work of Christ, but also to the fact that even our faith and repentance and new birth are his gifts. Supposedly, God cannot violate our "freewill" to choose or reject him. And how dare he discriminate between people! Those not chosen must have been created for hell. The Calvinist God is so unjust — he is the author of sin and unbelief and suffering.

And so, these objectors deem it necessary to reinterpret Paul.
For them, Paul is not discussing personal salvation or damnation — the election or reprobation of individuals.
Election (they say) is always collective — Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New.
God chose Israel for the purpose of bringing blessing to the world. But from the beginning that nation was pared down (via Isaac and Jacob), finally to just one person. Christ is that Chosen One, and we are elect only "in him".
In Romans 9, Jacob and Esau stand for the contrasting historical roles of Israel and Edom.
Pharaoh, too, was raised up not for damnation, but for his unique (historical) role.
Paul's focus on grace versus works shows that God is free to admit Gentiles through faith and apart from obedience to the Law of Moses.[12]

In answer, we should first note that Paul certainly is concerned with individuals and their eternal destinies:

- Salvation (and not historical roles) is the pressing issue throughout Romans 9 – 11.
  See 9:27; 10:1, 9-10, 13; 11:14, 26.
- Those Israelites who rejected Jesus were "accursed and cut off from Christ" (9:3).
  They were not saved (10:1), for they failed to submit to God's gift of righteousness in Christ (10:3-4).
- All who confess and trust in Christ are saved (9:9-10, 13).
  God calls and saves individual Jews and Gentiles (9:24).
- Others are "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" — for the display of God's wrath and power (9:22).
  "Wrath" and "destruction" are terms that pertain both to this life and the next.
- Those hardened for this role include Pharaoh (9:17) and most first-century Israelites (11:7).
  Ultimately, all non-elect people are hardened (9:18).

Second, we should note that in Romans 9, Paul twice interrupts his discussion to give voice to certain objections that might naturally follow from what he has just taught. They are objections to God's sovereign action, especially his action in relation to the non-elect. Indeed, they are the very objections that anti-Calvinists employ. The fact that he voices these objections, and answers them by affirming God's absolute sovereignty, shows that the Calvinist interpretation of Paul is correct.

The first objection is found in 9:14, following Paul's discussion of God's choice of Jacob and rejection of Esau. From the Genesis narrative, Paul had established that God's choice was made before the twins were born and therefore before either was capable of any moral action. God chose solely in accordance with his own will and purpose, apart from any contribution — any "works" — on their part (9:11).

[12] This last point ties in with N.T. Wright's so-called New Perspective on Paul. According to Wright, "works" in Paul have to do with obedience to the Law of Moses, which Gentiles were not required to obey. But this is patently wrong: "works" for Paul are much broader and include any moral action (Rom 9:11) — even one's desire or effort in relation to salvation (Rom 9:16).

The objection of 9:14 could be paraphrased as follows:
Isn't God unfair to (arbitrarily) decide to save one person but not the other?

Paul answers this objection:
God's choice illustrates the principle first revealed to Moses, namely, that God will have mercy on those whom he chooses to show mercy (9:15; cf. Ex 33:19).
In Adam every person is condemned. God is not obliged to save any, yet he graciously chooses to save some.
Salvation depends solely on God's mercy — a fact that gives him the right and freedom to choose its recipients.
God's choice takes no account of human desire or effort (9:16) — of "works" of any sort.

The second objection is found in 9:19, following Paul's discussion about Pharaoh and reprobation.
Paul has shown that God is free to choose whom to save (9:16), but what about those not chosen?
Paul gives the example of Pharaoh: God raised Pharaoh up for the very purpose of displaying his power (9:17).
Paul then generalizes the principle revealed to Moses to include reprobation (9:18, literal translation):
So then, to whom [God] wants he shows mercy, but whom he wants he hardens.

The objection of 9:19 could be paraphrased as follows:
Isn't God unfair to hold people (like Pharaoh) accountable or charge them with guilt when even their unbelief and disobedience are part of his irresistible will?

Here, Paul articulates a common anti-Calvinist sentiment, namely, that it would be unfair for God to condemn people who have no real choice. But the fact that Paul gives voice to this objection shows that that is precisely what he has been saying all along. And Paul's answer confirms this:

- As the Creator, God is entirely free to act as he sees fit (9:20-21).
  The very thought of the clay pot talking back to the Potter — asking him why he made him thus — is really quite ludicrous (9:20).[13]
  Note that human "freewill" forms no part of Paul's answer.
- The "vessels of wrath" are indeed "prepared for destruction" for the display of God's wrath and power (9:22). Just as Pharaoh was (9:17).
- The display of God's wrath serves to magnify his grace toward those "prepared beforehand for glory" — those whom he chooses and calls and saves (9:23-24).

For a good defense of the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9, see the following YouTube video:
James White: *Romans 9 Exegesis*; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_yngfbXH8c.

[13] Paul likely has in mind here some rhetorical questions that the Lord asks his people in Isaiah, which basically amount to this:
Is it right for the clay to critique the Potter?
In Isaiah 29:16, the pot tells the Potter: "You didn't really make me." Or it openly criticizes him: "He doesn't know what he's doing."
In Isaiah 45:9, the clay sarcastically challenges the Potter: "What on earth are you making? Your work displays a real lack of skill; it is almost as if you had no hands at all." (I have paraphrased these criticisms.)
The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges comments as follows for Isaiah 45:9-13:
"These verses are addressed to a section of the exiles who resented the idea of deliverance through a foreign conqueror. The strong word 'strive' and the emphatic reassertion of the mission of Cyrus (Isaiah 45:13), as well as the connexion with Isaiah 45:1-8, shew that deliberate opposition to the Divine purpose, and not mere faint-hearted unbelief (as in Isaiah 40:27, Isaiah 51:13), is here referred to." From: *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, notes for Isaiah 45. Via the Bible Hub website: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/isaiah/45.htm.

Appendix 4: WHY might God choose to save some and reject others?

God indeed chooses some and rejects others. And his choice is independent of anything in the person himself. We saw this in connection with Jacob and Esau: God chose before they were born, before either one could do anything good or bad (Rom 9:11-13). With respect to any individual, God is free to choose one way or the other. But might there be some reason for God to act this way? Why might he choose some and reject others?

In Romans 9:20-21 Paul answers the objector of 9:19. Paul defends God's actions thus:
God is the Creator! He is like a potter who, from a single lump of clay, sovereignly molds one portion into a vessel for honor (i.e., for special use) and another portion into a vessel for dishonor (i.e., for menial or everyday use). It is entirely his prerogative.[14]

What is Paul saying here?
First and obviously, he is affirming that God is entirely free to choose. God makes different vessels from the same lump, which means that there are no inherent differences that influence God's choice.[15]
Second, Paul is suggesting that God discriminates for the purpose of demonstrating the full range of his skills.

But more generally, all of God's actions depend on a prior and more basic concern for his own name and glory. God's "name" refers to his fame/renown/reputation — how he is to be thought of and remembered (Ps 135:13). His name concerns his attributes and character and the way he deals with and relates to people — full of love and mercy but never condoning sin, utterly faithful (Ex 34:5-7).
God's overriding concern for his own name undergirds his actions in election (2Sam 7:23; Jer 13:11), in judgment (Ex 9:14-16; 14:17-18), and especially in forgiving and rescuing his wayward people (Num 14:13-20; 1Sam 12:22; Ps 79:9; 106:8; 135:13-14; Isa 48:9-11; Jer 33:9; Eze 20:14, 22, 44; 36:20-23).

Paul is thoroughly conversant with this Old Testament background.
And so, in Romans 9 he gives the following reasons for divine reprobation:

1. God "raised up" Pharaoh in order to display his power and proclaim his name (9:17).[16]
2. More generally, the "vessels of wrath" are "prepared for destruction" for the display of God's wrath and power (9:22).
3. The display of God's wrath serves to magnify his grace toward those "prepared beforehand for glory" — those he chooses and calls and saves (9:23-24).[17]

We can summarize thus: To make himself better and more fully known, God deems it necessary to sometimes demonstrate the full range of his attributes, including his wrath.

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[14] In support of the (divine) potter's rights, Paul cites from Isaiah 29:16 and 45:9. Paul may have Jeremiah 18:4-6 in mind as well.
[15] "Same lump" of clay likely refers to our shared fallen status before God — our solidarity in sin and shared liability to judgment. Salvation is wholly undeserved. Paul notes that God endures "with much patience the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Rom 9:22, MEV). Elsewhere, he declares that all are "by nature children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). It is a wonder that God saves any and puts up with people for so long.
[16] Concerning Paul's citation from Exodus in Romans 9:17:
The Hebrew text of Exodus 9:16 has God declaring to Pharaoh that he has spared him (NASB: "allowed you to remain") so that God's power might be shown to Pharaoh. The Septuagint similarly has God preserving Pharaoh, but now God's purpose is to demonstrate his power through him (*en soi*: "in you"). But Paul, wanting to show God's absolute sovereignty over Pharaoh, has modified the Septuagint: "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, …"
[17] Also in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul affirms that God's eternal purpose to save his elect serves to magnify his own grace and glory. See especially verses 6, 12, 14.

Appendix 5: The cause of Jewish unbelief in John 12:37-41

John 12:37-41 (ESV):

> [37] *Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,*
> [38] *so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:*
> *"Lord, who has believed what he heard from us,*
> *and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"*
> [39] *Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,*
> [40] *"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart,*
> *lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart,*
> *and turn, and I would heal them."*
> [41] *Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.*

In seeking to explain widespread Jewish unbelief, John seems to agree with Paul:
12:37: The Jews failed to believe despite so many miracles having been wrought in their presence.
12:38: Isaiah had predicted such unbelief.
John's first citation is from Isaiah 53:1:
Not many Israelites would believe the message of salvation — the good news that God has wrought salvation through the death of his Servant (Isaiah 53).
But more than this: the Jews disbelieved "so that" Isaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled (vs. 38).
The Greek word here is *hina* (Strong's G2443) — "in order that", "so that", "for the purpose that".
That we are not (in saying this) reading too much into the text is confirmed for us by vss. 39 and 40.
12:39: John notes that "therefore they could not believe."
Indeed, according to vs. 40, God was actively at work to prevent faith:
God had blinded them spiritually and hardened their hearts so that they might not perceive and understand the message; as a result, they could not turn to him for healing.
John's second citation is from Isaiah 6:10:
During his commissioning (in 740 BC) as the Lord's prophet, Isaiah was told that no one would believe his message. Not a particularly encouraging message for a young preacher!
Therefore, Israel was already hardened in Isaiah's time, and such hardening continued down the centuries all the way to Jesus' time. To the extent that Isaiah's experience was replicated with Jesus and the apostles:
Few Israelites believed the gospel message.
12:41: Isaiah's vision of Yahweh in the temple (in Isaiah 6) was a vision of Jesus' glory.

God's active hardening of individuals is a terrible doctrine. But it matches what we read elsewhere:
God's hardening of Pharaoh and of first-century Israelites (Romans 9:17; 11:7); the exclusion of people from the book of life (Revelation 17:8); gospel truths being hidden from some (Matthew 11:25-26; 13:10-15).
Our God is to be feared, not trifled with.
The truth remains that anyone who desires salvation can call upon the Lord and ask for the grace of conversion. Such prayers will certainly be answered.