God's Foreknowledge: Does God elect on the basis of foreseen faith?

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A common response to Paul's seemingly unfair doctrine of election is to claim that God chooses people on the basis of his foreknowledge. That is, he chooses those whom he foresees will believe. But is that true?

Romans 9 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).
His answer: Only some within the elect nation are truly God's children; physical descent has never been the determining factor; God's choice and call of individuals have always been paramount (9:6ff.).
Note that election for Paul fundamentally pertains to <u>individuals</u> and relates to their eternal destinies:
God shows mercy to, or hardens, individuals (9:18); those hardened are "accursed and cut off from Christ" (9:3).
The election of individuals unto salvation is perhaps most clearly enunciated by Paul in Romans 8:29-30.[1]

Addressing the notion that God only chooses those whom he foresees will believe:

1. This 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.
   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 salvation is ultimately <u>his</u> choice — his choice precedes ours by a very wide margin!
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).

[1] It is necessary to emphasize this fact because some scholars claim that Paul's concern in Romans 9 is with national salvation and historical roles: Jacob = Israel vs. Esau = Edom. Yes, this is the concern in Malachi 1:2-3, which Paul references in Romans 9:13. Nor does Paul deny that God's promises relate to the nation as a whole (9:4-5); indeed, he anticipates their ultimate fulfillment in a yet future turning of the Jews to their Messiah (Rom 11:11-32). Yet the fact remains that Paul illustrates the principle of election by pointing to God's sovereign action towards individuals: Isaac, Jacob vs. Esau, and Pharaoh. Note also what he says later: *Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened* (Rom 11:7). In other words, within the nation elect individuals were saved; most (individuals) were rejected and hardened. All this is further discussed in Appendix 1.

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.[2]

   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[3]:

   > [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).

   The fact that salvation depends on God's mercy gives him the right and freedom to choose its recipients.[4]

   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, 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, and 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).

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[2] 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).

[3] God's choice was actually made long before they were born — in eternity past.

[4] The point being that God is under no obligation to save any, yet he chooses to save some.

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 by Paul in Romans 8:29 and 11:2 and by Peter in 1 Peter 1:20)?
   Answer:
   In Acts 2:23, God's foreknowledge is connected with his "fixed purpose" (literal Greek; cf. Ac 3:18; 4:28).
   In Romans and in 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 fore-love. Says Paul, it was "<u>in love</u> [that] he predestined us …" (Eph 1:4-5).
   Recall 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).
   (For further comments on foreknowledge as fore-loving, see Appendix 2.)
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).

The doctrine of predestination is good news for those who know their own spiritual inability.
God converts whomever he chooses, so we can ask him for help.[5]
True faith is <u>reliance</u> 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:

> *Those who know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You.*
> Psalm 9:10 (MEV)

[5] 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: Paul's view of divine election

Sometimes people view election in terms of God's general choice of people rather than his specific choice of individuals — that he has chosen the Church as a body rather than the individuals who comprise the Church.
As noted in footnote 1, some commentators claim that Paul's concern in Romans 9 is merely with national salvation and historical roles: Jacob = Israel vs. Esau = Edom.[6]
And indeed, this is the concern in Malachi 1:2-3, which Paul references in Romans 9:13.
Nor does Paul deny that God's promises relate to the nation as a whole (Rom 9:4-5); in fact, he anticipates their ultimate fulfillment in a yet future turning of the Jews to their Messiah (Rom 11:11-32).
Yet Paul illustrates the principle of election by pointing to God's sovereign action towards individuals.
He does so also in Romans 11:7:
Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.
In other words, elect individuals within the nation were saved; most (individuals) were rejected and hardened.
Consider the following:

1. Paul devotes three whole chapters (Romans 9 – 11) 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 her unbelief.
   11:1-10: An elect Jewish remnant proves that God has not completely rejected his people.
   11:11-32: Israel's fall has enabled the Gentiles to join God's people. God's promises may yet be finally realized in a future general conversion of the Jews.
   11:33-36: God's ways are ultimately unfathomable; he is entirely free to act as he wants.
2. God's promises concern the "real" Israel:
   Those Israelites who perish were never part of the true (spiritual) Israel (9:6b).
   From the examples of Ishmael and Isaac, mere physical descent was never the decisive factor; rather, God's call and promise is what mattered (9:7-9).
   Paul further illustrates this principle with respect to Jacob and Esau (9:10-13).
   Elsewhere Paul states that true Israelites are those who are spiritually circumcised: Romans 2:28-29; Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11-12.
3. Paul in Romans 9:6ff. shows that God's election and rejection fundamentally pertains to <u>individuals</u>:
   Isaac vs. Ishmael; Jacob vs. Esau; Pharaoh.
   God shows mercy towards individuals (9:15-16).
   From God's dealings with Pharaoh (9:17), Paul can affirm the following universal principle:
   So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills (9:18).
   Hence in Romans 11:7: Elect individuals within Israel obtained salvation; the rest were hardened.
4. Election elsewhere in the New Testament similarly concerns individuals:
   Paul in Romans 8:29-30.
   Jesus in Matthew 11:27; John 6:37; 17:9.
   John in Revelation 17:8.

[6] Adam Clarke (1760-1832) is one such Arminian commentator.

Appendix 2: God's 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.
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> [67] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 394; Jacobs and Krienke, "Foreknowledge," pp. 692-93.

Appendix 3: 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 4: 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.[7]
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 obeying the Law of Moses.[8]

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

- <u>Salvation</u> (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).

[7] The list of objectors includes such luminaries as William Lane Craig, John Lennox, and N.T. Wright.
[8] 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 plainly 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).[9]
  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.

[9] 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 concerning Isaiah 45:9:
Verses 9-13 "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 5: 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.[10]

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.[11]
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).
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).[12]

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.

[10] 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.
[11] "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.
[12] 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 6: 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:
Verse 37: The Jews failed to believe despite so many miracles having been wrought in their presence.
Verse 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 verses 39 and 40.
Verse 39: John notes that "therefore they could not believe."
Indeed, according to verse 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 new preacher!
But Isaiah's experience was replicated with Jesus and his apostles: few Israelites believed the gospel message.
Verse 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 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, asking for his Holy Spirit and the grace of conversion. Such prayers will be answered.