

IS GOD FAIR TO JUDGE THE NON-ELECT? ROMANS 3:5–8

INTRODUCTION

Many Christians offer a testimony of their salvation that, perhaps unintentionally, places an emphasis on their role in conversion.

We use language like, “I decided to follow Jesus” or “I invited Jesus into my heart.”

We reference a decision—whether a prayer prayed, hand raised, or some other response to a gospel invitation.

The gospel does require a response in the form of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, however, the biblical gospel—the gospel message that Paul proclaimed—is anything but man-centred.

As Paul opened his letter, he called his message “**the gospel of God**” because it is the **good news of how God saves His people**.

The gospel is God-centred and is, as Paul says in **Romans 1:16**, “**the power of God for salvation**.”

For many, we grow up hearing a **weak, anaemic, man-centred gospel** that is far from the message Paul proclaimed, so that when we first encounter the faithful proclamation of a God-centred gospel we are often troubled by what we hear.

Perhaps the part the people struggle with the most is the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture that **God is sovereign over salvation.**

Contrary to the man-centred distortion of our day, Paul preached that God saves only those that He has chosen—those He has elected.

As Paul wrote in **Ephesians 1:4**, God “**chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world....**”

In **2 Timothy 1:9** he wrote that, God “**has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity....**”

What tends to distress us the most are the implications for those whom God has not chosen—the non-elect.

If God will only save His elect ~~who repent and believe because He first works in their hearts to respond in this way~~, and if He will judge everyone else for their sinful rebellion, then is God really fair to judge the non-elect?

That was the objection that many Jews raised against the message of the gospel that Paul proclaimed.

It is an objection that resonates within many people's hearts because we often wrestle with the same question—

Is God fair to judge the non-elect?

Some people try to solve the problem by arguing that God is sovereign over the salvation of His people, but is **somehow NOT sovereign** over those who are eternally condemned under His wrath.

But that is not a solution that Scripture offers, and it is certainly not one that the apostle Paul would have presented.

Romans 9:10-13—

¹⁰ **And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac;**

¹¹ **for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that the purpose of God according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,**

¹² **it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.”**

¹³ **Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”**

Doctrine of reprobation

“Reprobation is the sovereign, eternal purpose of God not to save certain people but to give them over to their sins, for which he justly punishes them.”¹

¹ Gregg R. Allison, “Reprobation,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 183.

Three clarifications²—

First, the doctrine of Reprobation does not mean that God purposed to take innocent creatures, make them wicked, and then damn them.

Second, the doctrine of Reprobation does not mean that God refuses to save those who earnestly seek salvation.

Third, the doctrine of Reprobation in no way conflicts with God's righteousness/ justice/ fairness.

It is this last point that Paul focusses on as he responds to the objections of his Jewish opponents.

CONTEXT—

Argued for the universal need for the gospel:

- Pagans
- Moralists
- Jews

After dismantling the Jewish false confidence in their **POSSESSION** of the Torah and their **PRACTICE** of circumcision, some objected that Paul's message implied that God had rejected Israel and broken His covenant promises.

“Paul, if what you are saying is true, then God is a liar!”

² Cf. Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1949), 107–108.

As we learnt this past Sunday, Paul corrected his opponent by clarifying that God has neither rejected Israel nor lied by being untrue to His promises.

God **DOES** keep His promises, but that does not mean that someone can reject the gospel in unbelief and still be saved from God's wrath in the final judgment.

But in order to chose to follow God in repentance and faith, God must first choose you in an act of sovereign election.

Why does it depend on God's choice, and not yours?

Because of total depravity.

Ephesians 2:1-3

God's promises never implied universal salvation for every Jew based solely on their physical descent from Abraham.

God had sovereignly chosen from among every descendent of Israel those whom He would save.

Romans 9:6-7—

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;

⁷ nor are they all children because they are Abraham's seed....

To His elect, God then gives a new heart that responds to the gospel with repentance and faith.

Romans 2:28-29—

²⁸ **For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.**

²⁹ **But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit....**

So salvation is **received by grace** through faith alone, but is **demonstrated by the obedience** of faith.

~~Those who reject God in unbelief will be judged by God and punished in eternal condemnation under His wrath.~~

~~Those who receive God in faith will be justified by God and rewarded in eternal life.~~

So, as Paul argued in **Romans 3:4**, God is faithful to His covenant promises—both the promise to save those who put their faith in Him and judge those who reject Him in unbelief.

But if those who reject God in unbelief are totally depraved and unable to respond with repentance and faith without God's sovereign intervention, **then is it really fair for God to judge those who reject Him?**

CONTEXT [again]—

3:1–4 God is not true/ faithful

3:5–8 God is not right/ just

PROPOSITION

Paul rebuts two objections to his gospel message, arguing that God is righteous in judging the non-elect.

1. God is not fair
2. I don't need to obey

God's judgement of the wicked is fair/ just.

Paul wants us to be fully assured that God is righteous in both salvation and in judgement so that we will not be ashamed of the gospel.

1. OBJECTION ONE—GOD IS NOT FAIR

Many commentators will say that this is the **hardest passage** in the entire letter.

That shouldn't discourage you—that should encourage you.

“3:1–8... is something of a bridge between earlier and later parts of the letter, or like a railway junction through which many of the key ideas and themes of the epistle pass.”³

³ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, vol. 38A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988), 130.

5 But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say?

Jews believed that God's righteousness was connected to His judgement—

2 Chronicles 12:5-6

5 Now Shemaiah the prophet came to Rehoboam and the princes of Judah who had gathered at Jerusalem because of Shishak [king of Egypt], and he said to them, "Thus says Yahweh, 'You have forsaken Me, so I also have forsaken you to Shishak.'"

6 So the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, "Yahweh is righteous."

Ezra 9:13-15

13 After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this,

14 shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?

15 O Yahweh, the God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

Nehemiah 9:32-33

³² “So now, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and lovingkindness, Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You, Which has found us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all Your people, From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.

³³ However, You are righteous in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt in truth, but we have acted wickedly.

So why would the Jews object to Paul’s theology of God’s judgement?

The “**unrighteousness**” of the Jews that Paul refers to in **verse 5** implies, as he will explicitly state later, that they are **totally depraved and unable to keep God’s law**.

That is what is implied in **Romans 1–3**, and what Paul states explicitly in **Romans 8:5-8**—

⁵ **For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.**

⁶ **For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,**

⁷ **because the mind set on the flesh is at enmity toward God, for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so,**

⁸ **and those who are in the flesh are not able to please God.**

The only hope that Jews have of salvation is **God's electing grace**, as Paul will argue in detail in **Romans 9–11**.

In response to this gospel message of man's depravity and God's sovereign grace in salvation, the Jews objected that it **was unfair of God to judge them** if their only hope was His election on an **individual basis**.

Individual Jews relied on God's **corporate election** of Israel, but when Paul preached that their unfaithfulness demonstrated God's rejection of them, they objected that it was **not fair for God to condemn them** if He had not elected them and given them faith by sovereign grace.

So the heart of the objection is the very question we're asking today—

Is God fair to judge the non-elect?

As Paul **paraphrases the common Jewish objection**, since God's righteousness in judgment is highlighted by their unrighteousness in rebellion and unbelief, surely it is not just for God to punish them.

ILLUSTRATION: Jeweller's black cloth

There is a parallel in **Romans 9** when Paul deals with this in detail.

Romans 9:14

What shall we say then? Is there any unrighteousness with God? May it never be!

Is the God who inflicts wrath unrighteous? (I am speaking in human terms.)

He is simply paraphrasing the weak, unbiblical logic of his opponents—the product of their natural, unregenerate minds.

“Don’t think for a minute that I believe such perverted nonsense.”

6 May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

Psalm 50:6

And the heavens declare His righteousness, For God Himself is judge.

Psalm 58:11

And men will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; Surely there is a God who judges on earth!”

Psalm 94:2

Be lifted up, O Judge of the earth, Render recompense to the proud.

Genesis 18:25

Far be it from You to do such a thing, to put to death the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?”

Deuteronomy 32:4

The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.

The point of this question is to draw out the absurd and clearly impossible consequences of this allegation.

Objection restated—

⁷ But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?

The “**lie**” of the Jews = their covenant unfaithfulness.

“**The truth of God**” refers to His faithfulness, but also to the “**righteousness of God**” in **verse 5**, so that we should see Paul’s focus here on **God’s truthfulness in judging sin.**

Redounds to God’s glory by vindicating His righteousness in judgement.

God’s name and honour are cleared when He judges rebellious Jews.

The Jews objected to Paul’s gospel message because he taught that they, like all people, have no ability to keep the Torah, and everything depends on God’s sovereign election.

Romans 9:19

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”

2. OBJECTION TWO—I DON'T NEED TO OBEY

⁸ **And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.**

“If God is not righteous, then I don’t need to be righteous.”

That’s ridiculous!

Paul did not preach **antinomianism**.

“Have you not been paying attention?”

Obedience of faith (**1:5**)

Judgement according to works (**2:6**)

Salvation is received by grace through faith alone, but is demonstrated by the obedience of faith.

For a professed Christian to live in continual, unrepentant sin is a certain mark that he is not saved.

Romans 6:1-2

¹ **What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?**

² **May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?**

APPLICATION

Seven Ways to Respond⁴—

1. Don't Reject Reprobation because It Seems Unfair to You

2. Be Deeply Grateful That God Chose You

Romans 9:23

and in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory—

3. Hate Sin

Romans 6:1-2

1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?

2 May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

4. Embrace the Gospel Unashamedly

5. Proclaim the Gospel Unashamedly

You do not know who the elect are.

⁴ Andrew David Naselli, *Predestination: An Introduction*, ed. Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 201–203.

6. Don't Expect to Understand Every Aspect of Reprobation

“God’s hidden decree is not to be searched out but obediently marvelled at.”

7. Trust God

You might be tempted to distrust God when you think about specific unbelievers who are dear to you—a parent, a sibling, a child, a grandparent, a cousin, an aunt, an uncle, a close friend.

Deuteronomy 32:4

The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.

You can't know all the reasons God does what He does, but will you trust His character?

John Frame, *“The very nature of faith is to persevere despite unanswered questions.”*⁵

⁵ John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, ed. Joseph E. Torres, Second edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 179.

CONCLUSION

Paul has rebutted two objections to his gospel message, arguing that God is righteous in judging the non-elect.

1. **God is not fair**
2. **I don't need to obey**

God's judgement of the wicked is fair/ just.

3:1–4 God is not true/ faithful

3:5–8 God is not right/ just

God is righteous in both salvation and in judgement.

God is faithful so that there is a future salvation for Israel, but He is also just so that every individual must respond to the gospel with repentance and faith in order to be saved—if not, God's righteousness will be displayed not in salvation, but in judgment.

Paul's Jewish opponent rejects the gospel on the basis of his objections.

Paul wants us to be fully assured that God is righteous in both salvation and in judgement so that we will not be ashamed of the gospel.

Don't be **ashamed of the gospel**

Perhaps God's judgement of the non-elect makes you **ashamed of the gospel?**

- **By rejecting the gospel yourself?**
- **By keeping it to yourself?** Not proclaiming the gospel.

The the gospel is always been a **message of salvation** to some and **condemnation** to others—

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

¹⁴ **But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ, and manifests through us the aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.**

¹⁵ **For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;**

¹⁶ **to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is sufficient for these things?**

Joseph A. Alexander, *The Doomed Man*—

*There is a time—we know not when, a point—we know not where,
That marks the destiny of men to glory or despair;
There is a line, by us unseen, that crosses ev'ry path,
The hidden boundary between God's patience and His wrath.*

*How far may we go on in sin? how long will God forbear?
Where does hope end, and where begin the confines of despair?
An answer from the skies is sent, "Ye that from God depart,
While it is called "today" repent, and harden not your heart."⁶*

⁶ https://hymnary.org/text/there_is_a_time_we_know_not_when.
<https://www.logcollegepress.com/blog/2018/3/22/the-poetry-of-ja-alexander>.

BENEDICTION

Jude 1:24-25

- ²⁴ **Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,**
- ²⁵ **to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, might, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.**