

# Foreknowledge: Jacob and Essau

by

Bernie Koerselman

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## Introduction

Peter warned us about the writings of Paul. Though Peter said Paul agreed with the teachings of the other writers, Peter said some people distort what he said to their own destruction. It is important to understand that Paul cannot disagree with the other New Testament writers or someone is in error – even the Scriptures would be in error. So in reading any difficult writing of Paul, it must be interpreted in light of the context of the New Testament as a whole. Peter's warning:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (1 Peter 3:15-16).

So it is with Paul's passage pertaining to Essau and Jacob. Some claim this is proof that God predestines some to destruction and others to everlasting life.

As with other passages, Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. It is a fundamental principle to interpretation of documents at law that we let the document interpret itself where that is possible. It is always possible with Scripture.

## Romans 9:8-24

Let's look at the text that contains the story, as Paul related it:

In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. **Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad — in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls — she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."**

**It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.**

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

(Romans 9:8-24).

The portion in bold print is the part most often misinterpreted. A casual reading may indeed infer that God predestined hatred toward Esau and love toward Jacob. Scripture often requires more than a casual reading in order to mine its truths. It is so in this case. A casual reading can lead to false doctrine. Let's take a closer look.

## Abraham's Offspring:

Who are Abraham's offspring? Paul defined them as those who have faith:

Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:6-9).

## Election:

What is God's election (as used by Paul in Romans 9:11)? Is it something he predestined before the foundations of the earth that would be required of men without regard for their will? Or is it the result of his foreknowledge?

Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger" (Romans 9:11).

Scripture explains Scripture. Peter explains election and chosen:

To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the **foreknowledge** of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood (1 Peter 1:1-2).

God's elect – those chosen by God – are not elected or chosen by God predestining who will be saved or lost. Rather Scripture makes perfectly clear that they are chosen **according to the foreknowledge of God the Father**. Thus, all instances in the New Testament writings where the words "elect" and "chosen" are used, we know that this refers to those elected or chosen **according to God's foreknowledge!**

## God's Purpose in Election

Now let's let Scripture explain calling:

" . . . in order that God's **purpose in election** might stand: not by works but by him who calls" (Romans 9:11-12).

Let's first establish and agree that salvation is not by works:

For it is **by grace** you have been saved, **through faith**—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—**not by works**, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Then let's examine God's purpose in election:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been **called according to his purpose**. For those God **foreknew** he also **predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Romans 8:28-29).

What is God's purpose – his "purpose in election"? Isn't it that we believe in his Son, that we be saved by grace through faith, that we do the will of our Father who is in heaven, and that we be conformed to the likeness of his Son that he might be the firstborn among many brothers? More simply stated, God's purpose in election for those chosen (elected) is to fear, honor, and obey him. That definition encompasses persons in the Old Testament as well as New Testament believers.

Perhaps that is the thrust of the parable Jesus told of the wedding guests: "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless" (Matthew 22:11-12). The man was not conformed to the likeness of the Son – not dressed in wedding clothes. He was dishonoring to his host, coming to a wedding without wedding clothes, and disobedient to the requirement or custom that wedding clothes be worn to a wedding. What was his punishment? Jesus told us: "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'" (Matthew 22:13).

If that is God's purpose, then Paul's passage about Esau and Jacob becomes totally understandable. Two boys – twins – were born. One had faith in God; the other went his own way in rebellion to God. One God loved; the other he hated.

### **Jacob I loved; Esau I hated.**

Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13). From that come two very different interpretations:

The 1st interpretation, and likely that chosen by Calvinists: Before the foundations of the earth God determined he would love Jacob and hate Esau. He is the sovereign God – he has the right to determine on whom he will have mercy and on whom he will have compassion.

The 2nd interpretation, consistent with the passage above at 1 Peter 1:1-2, is based on the fact that God looked ahead with perfect foreknowledge. He saw that though Jacob began as a sly, devious person he grew into a man who feared God, who wrestled with God and required a blessing from him. Of him God said, "I loved Jacob." God also looked ahead through foreknowledge and saw Esau who spurned his birthright – the rights of the firstborn – by selling it to Jacob for a pot of stew. Esau's god, at that moment, was his stomach. God saw Esau would never honor him, just as he did not honor his birthright. Looking ahead, even before the twins were born, God said, "I hated Esau."

### **Is God Unjust?**

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Romans 9:14-15). The same is stated at Exodus 33:19 in the Old Testament.

Paul quoted Exodus 33:19, but it's context is very different than that in Romans where Paul discusses Esau and Jacob. Paul used God's statement as a truth that could be applied anywhere.

Is this verse saying God is a just God even though he makes arbitrary judgments about who will be saved and who will be lost – before the foundations of the earth, before any man had any choice in following Christ or rejecting him? That would seem to be the position of the Calvinists.

God will have compassion on whom he will and not be unjust because of what his Word says. What does his Word say? Let's examine some passages:

1. God's Word says all will have eternal life who believe in God's Son (John 3:16).
2. God's Word says salvation is by grace, through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

3. God's Word says he has predestined that all who are saved must be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29).
4. God's Word says, "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).
5. God's Word says without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).
6. God's Word says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).
7. God's Word says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36).

As shown above, God's Word sets forth criteria for his mercy and compassion: For example, he will have compassion and mercy on whoever believes in the Son; he will not have compassion and mercy on those who reject his Son. The same is true of the other criteria listed above.

Is this an arbitrary, unfair judgment made before the foundations of the earth, before any man could respond or reject God's son? No! Instead God is perfectly just. He set up criteria in his Word so all men could know how to be saved. Peter expressed God's desire: He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation (2 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote the same message to Timothy: "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3). Jesus taught the same message: God is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost (Matthew 18:12). Each of those quotations show God's heart of compassion, having given his son as a ransom to that all men could be freed and come to life, just the opposite of arbitrarily damning some and refusing eternal life to those who want it.

## Old Testament Confirmation

This is confirmed in the Old Testament. Moses, on God's behalf, warned the people of God's wrath if they did not obey him:

Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land (Deuteronomy 6:14-15).

Then Moses related God's criteria for receiving his compassion and mercy:

Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. Do what is right and good in the LORD's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers, thrusting out all your enemies before you, as the LORD said (Deut. 6:17-19).

Note the far more extensive listing of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28, which would come upon the people if they did not obey and keep God's commandments. Still another exhortation was given by Moses at Deuteronomy 30:15-18.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws;

then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

Not once did God say, or suggest, that the fate of the children of Israel was fixed before the foundations of the earth. Instead he urged them to be obedient, to diligently follow his commandments so they could live and prosper. He warned them of his grievous anger, wrath, and punishment if they would not. He stated the criterion for receiving his compassion and mercy – obedience to his commands.

## Not on Man's Desire or Effort

The following statement, standing on its own out of context, could seem to support the Calvinist position that everything to do with salvation is the work of God and that man plays no part in it.

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy (Romans 9:16).

Let's consider first the portion of Paul's statement that it does not depend on man's desire or effort. In what appears nearly an opposite of Paul's statement, Peter said: "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (1 Peter 3:14).

Peter has just said, "Make every effort." Paul said, "It does not depend on man's desire or effort . . ." Is this a contradiction? Are the writers talking about the same thing?

Consider again Ephesians 2:8: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Because the Word of God is always true without contradiction, and I believe without tension, there must be a way to reconcile positions that seem contrary to one another. In light of that starting assumption, let's examine Paul's statement that it does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

**Paul is discussing the grace of God.** As to obtaining salvation by man's effort or desire, it does not depend on that. It depends on God's mercy. It is God's grace expressed in mercy. If not for God's unmerited favor, having mercy on us, we could not be saved. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Thus salvation does not depend on man's desire or effort. It depends upon God's mercy.

**Peter is discussing the elements of faith** – salvation through faith – that requires much more than mental assent. The person with a saving faith must live out the life of Christ Jesus in his own life – he must walk as Jesus did (1 John 2:6) – and be conformed to the likeness of Jesus (Romans 8:29). Did Peter say salvation is all of God and man has no part in it? Just the opposite. He told his readers to "**make every effort**."

Peter's statement is consistent with the teaching of Jesus about salvation when he said, "**Make every effort** to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to" (Luke 13:24). Reversing the argument, apparently castigating Jews who saw no need to make an effort to

gain the Kingdom and the approval of God, Jesus said, "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet **make no effort** to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" (John 5:44).

If Paul were saying that no effort should be made in working out one's faith, he obviously would never suggest that effort should be exerted. Instead his exhortations are the opposite. He told the Romans: "Let us therefore **make every effort** to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Romans 14:19). And to the Ephesians he said, "**Make every effort** to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). To the Philippians he told of the balance – man's effort and God's work of salvation: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—**continue to work out** your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). Note the purpose stated in Romans 8:28-29 – that those God foreknew would be saved would be conformed to the likeness of his Son. God works in us through his Holy Spirit (see John 14:15-16, 21, 23, and 26). The Holy Spirit will be our teacher (John 14:26) . . . in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4).

The writer to the Hebrews exhorted, "Let us, therefore, **make every effort** to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11). He urged again, "**Make every effort** to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

Peter, in still another epistle wrote regarding salvation and the Christian life:

For this very reason, **make every effort** to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins (1 Peter 1:5-9).

But what about when Paul rebuked the Galatians, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Galatians 3:3). Surely that must support the Calvinist interpretation that human effort by a person is wrong, that all elements of salvation come only from God. But no, that is not what Paul is speaking against here. Paul is castigating the Galatians for following the Judaizers who tried to put the Gentile Christians under the yoke of the Jewish Law. They were saying, "Yes, Jesus died on the cross for your sins, but in addition to the forgiveness gained by the cross, you must also follow the Old Testament laws." According to the Judaizers, justification was not by faith alone, but also by following the Law. Of that position Paul warned, "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:9).

## Pharaoh Was Raised Up For a Specific Purpose

Isn't there a conflict when Scripture speaks of God's desire that "all men" come to repentance, that God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, and God hardening Pharaoh's heart or specially raising up others for work in his Kingdom? If God hardens a person's heart, isn't he arbitrarily preventing him from coming to a saving knowledge of the truth?

I believe the key to understanding Scripture is to understand there cannot be conflict or tension in a correct understanding of Scripture. It is easy to find conflict or tension between doctrines (from a superficial point-of-view). But that does not mean there is a correct interpretation of doctrines when that happens. All doctrine must be understood and explained by Scripture itself, not by human explanations.

If we start with a Calvinist point-of-view where God has pre-ordained or predestined those who will be saved or lost, then there is immediate and irreconcilable conflict with many passages of Scripture. As an illustration of that, Tom Adcock re-wrote John 3:16 for the Calvinist position:

"For God so loved the elect – not the world – that He gave His only begotten Son that the elect will believe and be saved because God will save them with irresistible grace, then give them the faith to believe it and the non-elect will go to hell because God has preordained this from the foundation of the world – not [that] whosoever believes in Him will have eternal life."

Is there a way to reconcile without tension the special purpose for which God has (and does) raise up people to fulfill his purpose? I believe there is.

First, I believe God has a special purpose for each person's life. That is easily seen from Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Thus, in a general sense, each person already has a God-directed life available to him if he will submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and be obedient to his teachings and commands.

There are many specific examples related in Scripture for us to see special plans God has had for people. John the Baptist is one such person. He was to be a Nazarite – neither to have fermented drink nor to cut his hair. Paul was another example. The Lord Jesus came upon him powerfully to reveal his will to Paul. God's dialogue with Jeremiah powerfully illustrates this point is:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
before you were born I set you apart;  
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

Were all these people predestined to do and be what they became? Or did God have a plan for their life and did God through foreknowledge know each of these would be faithful and fulfill his plan for them? I believe it is the latter.

Judas, who betrayed Jesus, is an example of one who was called by Jesus, but who ultimately betrayed his master. The betrayal was foretold in Scripture. The amount paid was foretold. Was this predestined? If so, we have a cruel God who would call someone through his Son only to damn him because it was a predestined plan that Judas must betray Jesus and be damned.

No, just as with Pharaoh, God could **foresee** the heart of Pharaoh and of Judas. Even though Judas walked with Jesus, heard the same teaching as the other disciples, went out two by two and experienced the power of the Spirit as they cast out demons and performed miracles, nevertheless **Judas remained a thief in his heart** – stealing from the purse which he held as treasurer for the disciples. He was **never** conformed to the likeness of the Son. **God knew this through his infinite foreknowledge**. God did not arbitrarily damn Judas. Judas **chose** a path that damned him. God used this son of perdition to fulfill his purpose, knowing in advance **through foreknowledge** the choices that Judas would make.

So with Pharaoh. Did God arbitrarily damn Pharaoh? Not at all. Through his foreknowledge, he could see the choice Pharaoh would make – that he would never honor the true and living God. So God used him to fulfill his purposes – to gain honor and glory for himself – as he released Israel from bondage in Egypt. He hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let the people go until God had performed all the miracles he wanted to do there, to let his people know that he was the one and only God who had all power and authority and that Israel could trust him to deliver them.

How many has God appointed as his witnesses to the nations who have not gone, who have rebelled, and who have refused to do what God determined in advance for them to do? Likely there are multitudes. Likely multitudes have not been reached because those God appointed were unfaithful. He appointed; they refused. We saw that example in Jonah though after being thoroughly disciplined Jonah relented and preached to Ninevah. How many may be disciplined by God but do not recognize their problems come from God as his rod of discipline and do not turn and follow him in obedience?

## Why Blame Us?

The following paragraph also begs to be misinterpreted. If it stood alone, without the rest of the New Testament teachings and Paul's other writings, the Calvinist position could be advanced from this. But, alas, such an interpretation is contrary to the other clear teachings of Scripture.

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?  
"Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"  
Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:19-21).

In this passage is Paul asking, "Then why does God still blame us?" No, he is putting words in the mouth of one of his detractors. It is as though the detractor had assumed the Calvinist position. Without agreeing or disagreeing, Paul set him straight saying no man has the right to talk back to God. God, as the potter, has the right to make us any way he sees fit, some for noble purposes and some for common use.

Paul tells his detractor God's truth in the next paragraph:

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with **great patience** the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:22-24).

Paul advances the truth of the gospel in the form of questions. What if . . . and what if . . .? But standing alone this paragraph also can be easily misinterpreted. It could be claimed that God would choose to show his wrath and make his power known by condemning most of mankind to perdition before the foundation of the earth, and just the opposite for those he predestined would be saved.

But, again, that would be opposite and contrary to the clear teachings of the rest of Scripture. Instead this correlates perfectly with the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:44-45:

"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

God shows his great patience with the evil, giving them sun and rain, just as he does those who are good.

Likewise Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the tares (weeds):

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn'" (Matthew 13:24-30).

In the parable, as in the passage at Romans 9:22-24, God chose to show **great patience**, letting the weeds grow together with the wheat though they were prepared for destruction – because they were evil.

But the objects of his mercy he prepared in advance for glory. Here again we see the application of Philippians 2:13: "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." How does God prepare the objects of his mercy in advance for glory? By working in them to will and to act according to his good purpose! And what is that purpose? That each person who will be saved must be conformed to the likeness of his Son (prepared in advance for glory) that he might be the firstborn of many brothers.

## Conclusion

Paul supplies the summary at the end of the chapter. As he started with Abraham as the father of those saved by faith, he closes with the contrast between righteousness that is by faith and the Jewish failure to obtain righteousness because they pursued it as if it were by works (Romans 9:30-32).

Contrary to what Calvinism says, **God does not arbitrarily save nor damn**. He has set forth criteria in his Word for all to see, study, know, and obey. Those who obey God's Son as their Lord are the objects of his compassion and mercy. Those who disobey, who reject his Son's lordship over them, remain the objects of his wrath.

God is sovereign. He accomplishes his purposes not only through those whom he **foresees** will be obedient to his will but also through those whom he **foresees** will reject him.

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