

Romans 9:19-29 Answers The Potter & The Clay

Context: Paul concluded Romans 8 with a promise that nothing can ever separate us from the love of Christ (9:31-39). Just prior to this assurance, he laid out an unbreakable link in the chain of salvation.

ESV **Romans 8:29-30** . . . those whom he foreknew he also predestined . . . And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The Problem: The issue in Romans 9 seems to be God's trustworthiness. Despite the fact the Jews had been God's chosen Old Testament people, most of them had rejected their own Messiah. *Had God's plan failed? If so, what sort of basis for Christian hope is there? Has God now rejected the Jews? Might God reject the church later? If God was not faithful to Israel, could we trust him to be faithful to Gentiles?* The answer to Israel's rejection of the Messiah lies with the doctrine of God's ultimate purposes and sovereignty in salvation (predestination).

The Answer: ESV **Romans 9:6** . . . it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel . . .

The word of God has not failed (9:6)! God made promises to Abraham and his descendants. These promises are true and reliable. They have not failed because God never promised them to all Abraham's descendants, but only to those physical descendants who were also his spiritual descendants. God's gave His word, His promise, to Abraham and the children of promise, not simply to all Abraham's physical children. Thus, not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.

Example: Draw a small circle within a large circle. The large circle is physical Israel. The smaller circle represents those physical Israelites who are also spiritual Israelites.

ESV **Romans 2:28-29** . . . no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.

ESV **Romans 4:12** [Abraham is] the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Review:

What can we learn about divine election from 9:10-13? (*Reread it*). God's selection of certain people to be children of promise was made before they were ever born and is based on God's purposes, not anything people do, either good or bad.

Thus Paul made two points: **1)** God has always made selections within the family of Abraham and **2)** God's selection has nothing to do with human activity (Barclay, p. 136).

What determines who God chooses to have mercy on (9:14-18)? (*Reread it*). It totally depends on God's will, not man's will or human effort. The point is that God can do whatever He chooses to do.

Like any good author, Paul anticipated that people would read about God's choice of Jacob over Esau (9:10-13) and exclaim, "That's not fair!" For God to sovereignly pick Jacob over Esau, without any regard for their good or bad actions, strikes at our sense of justice.

There is nothing offensive about the view that **1)** God chose Jacob because he foresaw that he would be a good guy. This view seems quite just. However, the view that **2)** God chose Jacob simply because He wanted to do so, without regard to anything Jacob was going to do, is most offensive. This Paul brought up the subject of injustice with God.

If Paul believed the first view, then this was the perfect opportunity to say so in answer to the reader's anticipated objection (9:14). Instead, he went on to underscore the truth that it is totally God's choice, and that God's choice was not based on anything we do or desire.

What is the difference between justice, non-justice and injustice (9:14)?

- 1) Justice is when you get exactly what you deserve (good or bad).
- 2) Non-justice is when you don't get something bad that you do deserve; non-justice is mercy.
- 3) Injustice is when you get something bad that you don't deserve. It is to be mistreated.

Perspective: It is important that we get our perspective right: God is under no obligation to save anybody. God has chosen some for mercy and the rest God passes over. One group gets **mercy** and the other group gets **justice**. No one ever gets **injustice**; mercy is non justice, but it is not injustice. Thus, there is no injustice with God (9:14); there is justice and there is mercy, but no injustice.

Paul wants his readers to understand that when we read about Jacob and Esau and are tempted to object it is not fair, the last thing we want from God is fairness or justice. If God is just, we all go to hell. Instead, what we want from God is mercy.

According to 9:15, on whom does God have mercy? (*Reread*) See Exodus 32 & 33. Paul here quoted Exodus 33:19, God speaking to Moses, to make the point that God has mercy on whomever He wants to have mercy. God spoke the words of Exodus 33:19 to Moses right after the golden calf incident. All the people deserved death, but God only punished 3,000 of them. The rest were shown mercy. It is God's choice (prerogative). Mercy, by definition, is not obligatory. A convicted criminal cannot go up to the judge and demand mercy.

Based on 9:16, upon who and what does God's mercy obviously not depend? It does not depend on human will or effort. God is not obligated to show mercy to anyone.

This verse alone should forever put an end to the tunnel of time view of election (that God's election is based on his foreknowledge of who would believe in Jesus).

What is the point of Ro 9:18? God does want what God wants to do. God chose Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Moses over Pharaoh and you over the unbeliever down the street.

******What is God's calling concerning the salvation of both Israelites and Gentiles (9:19-26)?**

1. What is the literary purpose of 9:19? The purpose is to voice anticipated objections from his readers. The fact that God picked Jacob over Esau not based on anything good or bad they would do, is offensive. The fact that God's mercy does not depend on man's desire or effort is offensive. The fact that God hardens people (like Pharaoh) is offensive.

Insight: If Paul believed that God was merely responding to man's freewill, he likely would have stated it here since it would remove any objection. However, Paul did not offer that explanation. Instead, he pointed out God's sovereignty and authority (the same as in 9:14).

Notice how Paul answered one question (9:19) with two more (9:20-21). **Joke:** Why does one Jew always answer another Jew with a question? Answer: Why not?

2. How do the questions of 9:20-21 answer the question of 9:19? Paul asks his own questions with answers that are obvious: God has the right to do whatever He wants to do with His creation.

Paul's words sound very much like Isaiah's:

ESV **Isaiah 29:16** . . . Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?

ESV **Job 38:1-7** . . . the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? . . . Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements — surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

ESV **Job 40:2** Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it . . . Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on everyone who is proud and abase him. Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low and tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below. Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you.

What is answer to the question of 9:21? God created us and of course He has the right to do whatever He pleases with us. We really are like pottery:

ESV **Genesis 2:7** . . . the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

The Point: God's ways may seem to reflect injustice or seem unreasonable, but they are not. It is blasphemous to judge God based on a weak, puny, limited human perspective. We have no right even to ask such a question as is expressed in 9:19. You would just as soon teach a dog calculus as understand God's ways.

ESV **Isaiah 55:8-9** . . . my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

3. What paradox is evident in 9:22? *See Romans 2:5.* God desired to pour out his wrath but held it back for a season. Instead of showing his wrath and power, He patiently endured their sins until later.

ESV **Romans 2:5** . . . because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

4. Why did Paul refer to these people as vessels (9:22)? *See 9:21.* Paul is comparing people to clay vessels created by a potter, people over whom God has absolute authority and right to use as He sees fit.

5. According to 9:22, what was true of those who should have received God's wrath long before they actually did receive it? They were created from the beginning as vessels of wrath. They were prepared (in advance) for destruction.

ESV **Proverbs 16:4** The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

ESV **1 Peter 2:8** . . . They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

6. What example of a vessel of wrath prepared for destruction (9:22) did Paul cite back in 9:14-18? Paul cited the example of Pharaoh from Exodus 1-18.

7. What is the point of 9:22? God has patiently endured the sin and antagonism of the vessels of wrath, but their judgment is coming. They will not escape.

8. Based on 9:23, why might God sometimes hold wrath back from the vessels of wrath (9:22)? It was to make known the riches of His glory to the vessels of mercy. God's mercy will shine brightly against the backdrop of God's wrath (*ESV Study Bible*, p. 2173). For example, God held back His full wrath against Pharaoh until after the ten plagues so that all Israel could see God's glory.

What word did Paul use to describe the purpose for which God prepared the vessels of mercy (9:23)? See also 8:28-30. He prepared them for glory.

ESV Romans 8:30 . . . those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Two Vessels: There are only two types of vessels in the world: **1)** vessels of wrath prepared for destruction and **2)** vessels of mercy prepared for glory. Based on what Paul wrote in 9:6-18, it appears the die was cast before either were ever born (just as with Jacob and Esau).

9. Who, specifically, are these vessels of mercy (9:24)? According to 9:24, the vessels of mercy are those whom God has called from both Jews and Gentiles.

ESV Romans 1:7 To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints . . .

ESV Romans 8:28 . . . we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

ESV Romans 8:30 . . . those whom he predestined he also called . . .

10. Paul's overall point concerns Israel. Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel (9:6). God's promises were only intended for those Israelis who also had the faith of Abraham. Why then in 9:24 did Paul add that God called people from the Gentiles also? Even though the context concerns why the Jews rejected their Messiah, Paul is here introducing the Gentiles as part of God's original plan of salvation. It is not that God's plan A, for Israel, failed and so now the Gentiles are plan B.

ESV Romans 1:16 . . . the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

11. 9:25 ends in a question mark. The question begins in 9:22 with "What if". It is a hard question to comprehend. What statement is being made with this question? The question is actually grammatically incomplete (Cranfield, p. 492). The purpose of the question seems to be to suggest the big picture of God's workings among men. God's temporary withholding of wrath is designed to benefit those who are called of God, the vessels of mercy. The question also serves to draw out the trust of 9:21.

What type of believers are described in 9:25-26? It is about Gentile believers.

12. Why would Paul bring this quote from Hosea into his argument (9:25-26)? Quoting from Hosea added credibility to the truth that God calls Gentiles to be His people just as legitimately as He had called the Israelis. It must have been a shock to the traditional Jewish mindset that **1)** God would work through people who were not Hebrew and **2)** God had called only a minority of the Israelis.

13. What terrible truth concerning Israel had Isaiah long ago predicted (9:27-29)? Isaiah predicted that only a remnant of Israelis would be saved.

ESV **Romans 9:6** . . . not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel . . .

Perspective: Israel's rejection of Jesus is not total. Divine election is still having its effect (Hendriksen, p. 333).

Prophecy 101: Some believe there will eventually be a total restoration of Israel (based on 11:25-27). However, based on 9:27, what should we expect in the future? Only a remnant of Israel will be saved (Hendriksen, p. 331). We'll study later how these two texts go together (9:17 & 11:25-27).

Prophecy 102: Did Paul say anything here about the saved remnant returning to the Promised Land (9:27)? Paul said they would be restored to the Lord but said nothing about the land.

14. According to 9:29, what is the only reason the Jewish race has continued on in existence? The only reason the Jewish race continues to exist is because God sovereignly worked to preserve for Himself godly offspring (the remnant). Otherwise they would have been destroyed by God as was Sodom and Gomorrah (and the Canaanites). The continued existence of the Jewish race is God's mercy in action.

Perspective: Divine election is a doctrine of mercy, not severity. If there was no election, all would have been condemned.

The Big Picture: God's Word has not failed (9:6). Both the Jewish rejection of the Gospel and Gentile acceptance of the Gospel are fulfillments of God's Word.

9:19-21 ~ We, as pots, are in no position to argue with the Potter.

9:22-24 ~ God, the Sovereign Potter, had His own special purposes in creating us (Jew & Gentile alike).

9:25-29 ~ Israeli rejection and Gentile acceptance of the Gospel was prophesied long ago in the Hebrew Scriptures.

So What?

18. How does 9:19-29 prove that the Word of God to Israel has not failed (9:6)? God is sovereign over all. His purpose from the beginning was to call a remnant from Israel to be saved. Another purpose God had from the beginning was to call certain Gentiles to be His people.

19. What does 9:19-29 teach us about God? As our creator God is sovereign over all men. He has absolute right over us to do with us as He pleases. Whatever God says is true and whatever He does is right because He is God.

20. What personal applications can you walk away with from 9:19-29?

- I am in no position to judge God or challenge what He does. 9:19.
- If God bears with great patience those He knows will never be saved, I should also have patience with people who have not experienced God's grace, 9:22 (Hendricksen, p. 336).

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

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