

Read 9:1-29

This is a hard passage.

It is not especially difficult to understand what Paul is saying.
He is pretty straightforward.

But we don’t like to hear it.

We like to think that *we* are in charge.
We like to think that *we* get to define what is fair, just and right.

But Paul’s answer to us is “who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”

This is very much like God’s answer to Job.

When Job complains against God,
the LORD came to Job and said, in effect,
who are you, Job?
Who are you to answer back to God?

As Paul said in 8:28-30,

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,
for those who are called according to his purpose.
For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,
in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
And those whom he predestined he also called,
and those whom he called he also justified,
and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

God has predestined some to be conformed to the image of his Son.

And because of this, Paul said in verses 38-39 of chapter 8,
that nothing in all creation

“will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

But as we saw last time,

this doctrine of election raises a question for Paul:

Has the word of God failed?
Because God called Israel as well.
Israel was God’s chosen people – the “elect” people of God.

But God appears to have rejected Israel.
How can Paul say that nothing can separate us from the love of God?
When plainly Israel *has been* separated from the love of God?

1. Is God Unjust for Choosing One and Rejecting Another? (9:14-18)

Some have tried to answer this by saying that God foresees our faith and good deeds,
and so God chooses based on his foresight.

But that is not what Paul says.

If God chooses you based on what he knows that you will do,
then his choice is based on works.

And that would overthrow the whole point of what Paul is saying here.

Paul's point is that God's choice is not based on works, but on "him who calls."

And he illustrates that with the example of twins – Jacob and Esau –
*though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—
in order that God's purpose of election might continue,
not because of works but because of his call—
she was told, 'The older will serve the younger,'
as it is written,
Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*

Today there are all sorts of "twin" studies.

How much does genetics influence the "way you are"?
Nature vs. nurture.

But before Jacob or Esau had done anything good or bad,
God had already decided what he would do with them.
"The older will serve the younger."

What shall we say then?

Is there injustice on God's part?

Is it fair for God to love one twin and hate the other?
Isn't this unjust?

By no means! (me genoito)

And then he explains his answer by quoting from Exodus 33:

*For he says to Moses,
I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*

Exodus 32-34 tells the story of Israel's rebellion while Moses was on Mt. Sinai.
The Israelites had crafted a golden calf and used that golden calf in worship.

God had threatened to destroy them,
but Moses interceded on Israel's behalf,
and God promised to have mercy.
But here he makes it clear that he will have mercy on whom he wishes.

Paul reminds us that all have sinned.
None of us deserve mercy.

If you think about it, it should be obvious.
Who deserves mercy?
No one.
The very *definition* of mercy is that it is free and undeserved.
And God made it clear to Moses that his mercy and compassion
is not based on anything other than his own purpose and choice.

So is there injustice with God?
No, because God is not *obligated* to show mercy to anyone.

God does not have to answer to you.
You do not get to tell God how he should run this universe.

He is God.
You are not.

As Paul concludes in verse 16:
So then it depends not on human will or exertion
[literally, not of him who wills or runs]
but on God, who has mercy.

There is nothing you can do to earn God's mercy.
He acts according to his own purposes in election.

And this is true not only of Israel, but also of the nations:

For the scripture says to Pharaoh,
For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you,
and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.
So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. (v17-18)

Here Paul quotes Exodus 9:16 which says that God raised up Pharaoh for a purpose:
Namely, that God might show his power in Pharaoh,
and that his name – the name of Yahweh – might be proclaimed in all the earth.

God's purpose in election is not merely in showing mercy on whom he will have mercy.
God's purpose in election is also to show forth his power and send forth his name.

And for that purpose he has mercy on some,
and he hardens others.

Paul knows what reaction he will get to this.

2. Why Does God Find Fault if No One Can Resist His Will? (9:19-21)

*You will say to me then,
Why does he still find fault?
For who can resist his will?*

Paul understands the implications of what he has just said.
He has said that in some cases God actually hardens people,
preventing them from listening to his voice.

And Paul does not try to avoid the implications of this.
He doesn't even point out (as he could have)
that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first,
and *then* God further hardened Pharaoh's heart to accomplish his purpose.

Paul has no interest in making this easy for you.
He *knows* that you want to judge God.
He *knows* that you think that you can tell God what he should and should not do.

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?

Who are you?
Who are you to judge God?

*Will what is molded say to its molder,
Why have you made me like this? (v19-21)*

The creature has no right to complain against the Creator.
He is God.
You are not.

*Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use
and another for dishonorable use?*

Here Paul draws on the language of Isaiah,

when Isaiah was speaking of Cyrus.
Cyrus was the king of Persia who restored Judah and Jerusalem after the Exile.

God had said to him,

“I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me.” (Is 45:5)

It is interesting that in the context of speaking of the hardening of Pharaoh,
Paul also speaks of the calling of Cyrus – another pagan king.

Isaiah had said that Cyrus was a pot in the hands of God.

*Woe to him who strives with him who formed him,
a pot among earthen pots!
Does the clay say to him who forms it,
‘What are you making?’
Or ‘Your work has no handles?’*

Cyrus would accomplish God’s purposes.

Remember that Paul is talking about Israel.

And so he speaks of the Exodus from Egypt –
when God hardened Pharaoh and delivered his people;
and he speaks of the Restoration from Exile –
when God used Cyrus as the vessel of deliverance for Jerusalem.

But it is not just Pharaoh and Cyrus who are clay in the potter’s hands.

Isaiah also speaks in 64:8 of the people of God:
*But now, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.*

Paul’s answer to the question of what is going to happen to Israel
is to remind his readers of Israel’s history.

God has always been in control of history.

He is the potter.

We are the clay.

And out of the same lump (the nations)

he made one vessel for honorable use (Cyrus)
and one for dishonorable (Pharaoh).

In the same way out of the same lump (the twins, Esau and Jacob)

he made one vessel for honorable use (Jacob)
and one for dishonorable (Esau).

But why?

Why has God chosen some and rejected others?

Paul gives the answer in verses 22-24,

and then explains it with three quotations from the prophets in verses 25-29.

3. What Is God's Purpose in Election? (9:22-29)

*What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power,
has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,
in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy,
which he has prepared beforehand for glory –
even us whom he has called,
not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (v22-24)*

Let's be clear as to what Paul says here:

God is the potter,

and he has crafted some vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction.

Some people – taken from the same lump of clay as we –

were crafted in order to be hardened and destroyed.

But Paul says that God's purpose – his desire – his will in this matter –

was to show his wrath and to make known his power.

And secondly,

that God's purpose in this was to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy,
which he has prepared beforehand for glory.

Paul uses two very different words here.

A slightly more literal translation might suggest that
there are some who are produced for destruction,
but there are others who are prepared beforehand for glory.

God has patiently endured the vessels of wrath

because of his purpose in making known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy.

And who are these vessels of mercy?

-- even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles.

But who are the vessels of wrath?

Paul uses three passages from the prophets to explain this.

Three passages that show that God would harden not merely Gentile kings,
but even Israel.

As indeed he says in Hosea,

*Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,'
and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'
And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,'
there they will be called 'sons of the living God.' (v25-26)*

At first blush you might think that this is speaking of the Gentiles.

After all, the Gentiles are the ones who went from being “not my people,”
to “my people.”

But everyone in Paul’s day knew what Hosea had said.

This is from Hosea 2:23 and 1:10,

where God tells Israel that their time of Exile has come.
He is going to declare Israel “Not my people” and “Not loved.”

But God promises that one day he will restore them and he will once again call them
“Sons of the living God.”

In other words,

the hardening of Israel is *not* surprising.

The fact that God has vessels of wrath among Israel
is exactly what the prophets had said would happen.

And if Hosea’s testimony is not enough, Paul turns to Isaiah:

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:

*'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea,
only a remnant will be saved,
for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully
and without delay. (v27-28) [from Isaiah 10]
(or, “completely and concisely”)*

There is no wasted effort with God.

There is no wasted time.

He does what he promises, in his way and in his time.

And what has he promised?

Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea...

Remember the promise to Abraham?

Your descendents will be as the sand of the sea...

In other words,

though outwardly Israel appears to have prospered,

“only a remnant will be saved.”

In other words,

Paul is saying, Look, God said that only a remnant of Israel would be saved.

And what has happened?

Messiah came, and only a remnant of Israel has believed!

And as Isaiah predicted, (Isaiah 1:9)

If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,

we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah (v29).

Once again, God had said that he would only leave a remnant.

This, then, is God’s purpose in election:

that out of the same lump he would craft some vessels of wrath,

produced for destruction,

and he would endure them patiently, for the sake of the vessels of mercy,

prepared beforehand for glory.

Conclusion

Some have said that the “lump” refers to Israel,

and so therefore this passage cannot refer to all humanity.

They say that this passage teaches nothing with respect to individual election or reprobation.

But verse 24 makes it clear that Paul is thinking of more than Jews.

“even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles.”

The vessels of mercy that were crafted from “the same lump”

include both Jews and Gentiles.

Likewise, the vessels of wrath include Pharaoh.

After all, Paul has already shown us in Romans 4-5

that the story of Israel is rooted in the story of Adam.

And the children of Abraham include all those who believe –

and exclude many who could claim biological descent.

But also in verse 24 we are reminded of the “call.”

“even us whom he has *called*.”

God’s call pierces the deafness of our hearts.

His Light illumines the darkness of our minds.

His Spirit sows the seed of life in us while we were yet dead in our trespasses and sins.

And so listen again to Romans 8:28-30 in the light of Romans 9,
*We know that for those who love God all things work together for good,
for those who are **called** according to his purpose.
For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,
in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
And those whom he predestined he also called,
and those whom he called he also justified,
and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

God's purpose in election is to bring many sons to glory.
And he will accomplish that purpose,
completely and concisely.

When you are tempted to grumble,
when you are inclined to say that God is going about this all wrong,
when you want to say the Potter, "why did you make me like this,"
remember,

Who are you?

Who am I to answer back to God?
Do I really know better than God?
Would you like to teach God his business?

But don't stop there.

Also remember where Paul goes next:

God's business is to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy.

After all, nothing can separate us from the love of God *in Christ Jesus our Lord*.

God's purpose is to make you like Jesus.

To conform you to the image of his Son.

That is what he is doing,
completely and concisely.