

XXI. The Divine Potter

October 4/5/6, 2016

Romans 9:19-33

Aim: To acknowledge the sovereignty of the Divine Potter and His absolute right to choose His people out of all nations and save them by faith alone and not the works of the law.

Verses 14-23 are a detour from the main road of Paul's argument. Paul takes this detour because he knows that his insistence on God's initiative in determining who should be saved and who rejected (see vv. 10-13 especially) will meet with questions and objections. Appropriately, therefore, Paul reverts to the diatribe style, with its question-and-answer format and references to a dialogue partner, that he has utilized earlier in the letter (see 2:1-3:8; 3:27-31; 6-7). While Paul himself formulates these questions in order to carry on his argument, they undoubtedly represent objections that Paul has heard frequently during his ministry. Indeed, these questions state the inevitable human response to an insistence on the sovereignty of God in salvation; if God decides apart from anything in the human being whom He will choose and whom He will reject (v. 13), how can He still be 'righteous' (v. 14) – and how can He blame people if they reject Him (v. 19)? Paul responds to the first question with citations of and comments on Scripture (vv. 15-18) and to the second with a series of rhetorical questions (vv. 20-23).

A. The Sovereignty of God (Romans 9:19-23)

The diatribe style becomes more pronounced in this paragraph (vv. 19-23). Paul explicitly quotes his interlocutor – 'You will then say to me' – and answers the objections raised in the questions of v. 19b with a series of rhetorical questions of his own (vv. 20a, 21, 22-23).

1. The Objection (9:19)

¹⁹*You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'*

Paul anticipates another angry question in verse 19. The reasoning goes like this: 'Paul, you say that Pharaoh was manipulated to work out God's plan—that Pharaoh's evil actually brought glory to God. How can Pharaoh be held accountable for his actions since he was used by God? Your God is unfair!'

In other words, if God sovereignly 'has mercy on whom He desires and hardens whom He desires,' how can human beings be held responsible? How can they be blamed for their unbelief and sin when their destiny has already been divinely determined? Again, such reasoning challenges God's justice and righteousness.

The objector wonders how God can 'still' – that is, assuming the truth of Paul's teaching in v. 18 – 'find fault' with people. For, 'who resists His will?' Embodied in these questions is the objection that God's sovereign act of hardening (v. 18b) jeopardizes the clear biblical teaching about the justice of God's judgment on people who resist him (see 1:19-23). For only if people are responsible for their own actions can God's judgment be truly just. Yet Paul's teaching about the sovereignty of God in hardening appears to remove such responsibility. Before analyzing what Paul does say in response to this objection, we do well to note what he does *not* say. He makes no reference to human works or human faith (whether foreseen or not) as the basis for God's act of hardening. Nor does he defuse the issue by confining God's hardening

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only to matters of salvation history; quite the contrary, vv. 22-23 make more explicitly than ever that Paul is dealing with questions of eternal destiny. In fact, Paul never offers – here or anywhere else – a ‘logical’ solution to the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility that he creates. That he affirms the latter is, of course, clear; and we must never forget that Paul will go on in 9:30-10:21 to attribute the Jews’ condemnation to their own willful failure to believe. Paul is content to hold the truths of God’s absolute sovereignty – in both election and in hardening – and of full human responsibility without reconciling them. We would do well to emulate his approach.

2. The Response (9:20-23)

a) *The Pot’s Lack of Rights (9:20)*

²⁰*But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’*

Paul does not answer the question. He does not slip into Arminianism and say, ‘The reason He still finds fault is that all sin is found in man, and so it is dependent on what people do with their choices.’ We find none of that here. Paul’s response to this anticipated objection is simply a moral rebuke. Before Paul begins to answer the question, he calls the objector to remember who he is and who God is. He is basically saying to those who constantly carp against God’s sovereignty, ‘Who do you think you are?’ (cp. Job. 38:2-3).

‘O man’ need not have a derogatory sense, since this address occurs in dialogues similar to Paul’s as polite address. But the present context, which emphasizes the gulf between human beings and God shows that Paul chooses the term to accentuate the subordinate, creaturely status of the objector; ‘who are *you* to answer back to God?’ Paul is saying, in effect, ‘Man, know your place. God is God, eternal and almighty, the Maker of all. Man is made by God and utterly dependent upon Him.’ In other words, it is blasphemous even to question, not to mention deny, God’s right to hold men accountable when they are captives of His sovereign will.

Tiny man—whose life is just a breath, whose history proves over and over that despite all his learning and technological triumphs he repeatedly makes colossal errors and falls into unspeakable barbarism – this puny man stands before the God who knows the end from the beginning, who is the perfection of wisdom and love—and talks back to Him. How absurd!

Paul quotes Is. 29:16 to remind the objector of the dependent and subordinate position of the human being in respect to God. Human beings are in no more of a position to ‘answer back’ to God than a vase is to criticize its molder for making it in a certain way. Paul is not here denying the validity of that kind of questioning of God which arises from sincere desire to understand God’s ways and an honest willingness to accept whatever answer God might give. It is the attitude of the creature presuming to judge the ways of the creator – to ‘answer back’ – that Paul implicitly rebukes.

It is obvious from Paul’s wording that the ones who might be asking such questions would not be seeking God’s truth but rather self-justification. Attempting to excuse their own unbelief, sinfulness, ignorance, and spiritual rebellion, they would be apt to accuse God of injustice. But because human understanding is so limited, even sincere questions about God’s sovereign election and predestination ultimately must go unanswered.

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b) *The Potter's Rights (9:21)*

²¹Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

Does clay ever talk back to the potter (v. 20b)? Of course not! Moreover, the clay of mankind is sinful through and through. So the question is not, 'Why are some made for dishonor?' because dishonor is the natural state of the clay. The question is rather, 'Why are some selected for honor?' As believers we must rest in this: God is not answerable to man for what He does. However, He can be relied upon to act consistently with His character, which has been disclosed supremely in Christ. With such a God, why should any of us question His ways? In other words, God must be seen as free to be God, to have ultimate authority in human affairs, for whatever His ultimate purposes might be.

Although it is to an infinitely greater degree, God is the creator of men much as a potter is the creator of his clay vessels. And it is no more rational, and far more arrogant and foolish, for men to question the justice and wisdom of God than, if such were possible, for a clay bowl to question the motives and purposes of the craftsman who made it. To fully understand God, we would have to be equal to the God who made us—a notion even more absurd than a clay pot's being equal to the potter who molded it.

Paul's rhetorical question asserts the right of the potter to make out of the same 'lump' of clay both a vessel 'for honor' (*εις τιμην, eis timēn*) and one 'for dishonor' (*εις ατιμιαν, eis atimian*). While Is. 29:16 and (probably) 45:9 have furnished the immediate source of Paul's language, the metaphorical application of the potter and the clay is quite widespread in both the OT and Judaism (see e.g., Job 10:9; 38:14; Is. 29:16; 45:9-10; 65:7; Jer. 18:1-6).

Noting that several of the OT texts involved (Is. 45:9; Jer. 18:6-10) focus on Israel as a nation, some scholars think that Paul is arguing for God's right to use the people of Israel 'for dishonor' – in other words, to use the nation in a negative way in salvation history. On this general approach, then, the verse is asserting God's right to use nations, or individuals, for different purposes in His unfolding plan of salvation. Some – such as Ishmael, Esau, Pharaoh, and the hardened Jews – have a negative or 'dishonorable' role to play in the purposes of God in history. Others – such as Isaac, Jacob, and believing Jews and Gentiles – have a positive role.

Other scholars, however, note that many of the OT and Jewish texts that compare God to a potter focus on God as Creator – a point that Paul underscores by using the verb *plassō* (cp. Gen. 2:7; Job 10:8-9; Ps. 33:15). On this reading, Paul is asserting God's right to make from the mass of humanity (the 'lump') some persons who are destined to inherit salvation and others who are destined for wrath and condemnation. Certainty about which OT and Jewish texts Paul may have in mind is impossible to attain and probably immaterial: Paul's imagery is probably distilled generally from many of them without being specifically dependent on any of them. This means that our exegetical conclusions must be guided by Paul's own use of the metaphor, and not by any specific contexts in which the metaphor appears. We have seen that Paul is applying his teaching to the issue of the present spiritual condition and eternal destiny of unbelieving Jews (and believing Jews and Gentiles). This makes it likely that Paul is thinking here also of the eternal destiny of individuals.

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c) Vessels of Wrath (9:22)

²²*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...*

Would there be anything wrong with a just and holy God displaying His power and wrath? We might struggle with that because we live in a culture that has rejected any ideal of a wrathful God, but Paul refuted that back in Romans 1:18. When we see Paul talk about God's showing His power—His wrath for vessels fit for destruction and dishonor—we must not think that God punishes innocent people or that He finds fault with the faultless.

A paraphrase of vv. 22-23 follows: 'What objection can you make if it is in fact the case that God has tolerated with great patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction when you realize that His purpose in doing so has been to demonstrate His wrath, make known His power, and – especially – to make known the riches of His glory to vessels of mercy, prepared beforehand for His glory?'

Paul now returns more directly to the critical question of Jewish unbelief in contrast to the more positive response of the Gentiles. He picks up the example of Pharaoh and continues the 'potter' image into verses 22-23, but with three important refinements (signaled by the opening, 'But what if...'). First, it is true that, like the potter, God is powerful and has the right to make of clay various 'vessels.' But unlike the potter who would merely cast an unsuitable vessel to one side, God shows 'much patience' towards such a 'vessel.' Second, even more to the point, God displays such great patience to the rejected vessel *in order to* shower 'the riches of His glory upon a vessel of mercy.' Clearly, then, the 'vessels' are 'humans' about whom God, the compassionate 'potter,' cares deeply. Third, Paul's words are hypothetical, expressing a 'what if' rather than a categorical assertion. He does not say that God has condemned Israel forever.

Paul gives two reasons for, although not a complete explanation of, God's allowing sin to enter and contaminate His universe. The Greek term behind 'willing' is much stronger than this English word connotes. The Greek word carries the idea of determined intent, not indifferent or helpless acquiescence. First, Paul says, God determined to allow sin in His creation because it gave Him the opportunity 'to demonstrate His wrath.' God is glorified in displaying His wrath, just as surely as in displaying His grace, because both of those attributes, along with all the others, comprise His divine nature and character, which are perfectly and permanently self-consistent and are worthy of adoration and worship. Even God's anger, vengeance, and retribution poured out on sinners are glorious, because they display His majestic holiness. Second, God allowed sin to enter the world in order 'to make His power known.' His power is manifested in His judgment and punishment of sin. God has every right to act gloriously in such judgment, but He has, by His mercy, 'endured with much patience' a world of sinners. He has endured their unbelief, rejection, hatred, blasphemy, and iniquity, while patiently allowing time for repentance (cp. Ps. 103:8; 2 Pe. 3:9). 'Vessels of wrath prepared for destruction' is surely one of the most tragic identifications of unbelievers in all of Scripture. Paul, of course, is speaking of ungodly and unrepentant *human* 'vessels,' all of whom will feel the ultimate wrath of God, for which they have been 'prepared for destruction' by their own rejection of Him. He leaves them *in their sin* unless they repent of it and turn to His Son for deliverance.

In v. 22, Paul is reiterating the point that he made with respect to God's dealings with Pharaoh in v. 17: God works with those who are not in positive relationship with Him to display in greater degree His own nature and power. The Exodus background makes it clear how God's raising up

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of Pharaoh contributed to the widespread publication of His power and name: Pharaoh's obduracy required God to work miracle after miracle in order to secure His purpose. But how has God's patient toleration of the vessels of wrath served the purpose of manifesting His wrath and power? On two other occasions Paul ascribes 'patience' (*makrothymia*) to God, and both assume a positive purpose for that patience: allowing an opportunity for repentance (Rom. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:16). The purpose of God's patience here is to allow the rebellion of His creation to gain force and intensity so that His consequent victory is all the more glorious and also (perhaps primarily) to give opportunity for Him to bestow His mercy on those whom He has chosen for His own (v. 23). This interpretation fits with the causal meaning of the participle 'wishing' in v. 22a. In addition, it accords with the sharp contrast Paul draws in these verses between the vessels of wrath and the vessels of mercy. We must remember at this point that God, in strict justice, could have executed His sentence of condemnation on the entire human race immediately after the Fall. It is only because of God's great patience that He has waited to bring down His wrath on a rebellious world so that He can finish His wise and loving plan. The parallels with vv. 17-18 – where God 'raises up' Pharaoh and hardens – and with v. 23 – where the subject of 'prepared beforehand' must be God – makes clear that God is the agent of this 'preparing.' The phrase 'prepared for destruction' would then refer to God's final act of reprobation whereby He destines the vessels of wrath to eternal destruction.

d) Vessels of Mercy (9:23)

...²³ *in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—*

God has withheld the final judgment that could rightfully fall on His rebellious creatures at any time not only because He wanted to display more gloriously His wrath and power (v. 22a) but also, and especially, because He wanted to 'make known His glorious riches to vessels on whom His mercy rests, vessels whom God prepared beforehand for glory.' God's ultimate purpose in His decree of hardening is mercy. But His mercy is in this context clearly discriminating rather than universal: some receive mercy (v. 18), those 'vessels' of mercy whom God chooses (vv. 15-16); others, vessels of wrath, are hardened (v. 18). Therefore we must not allow the preeminence of God's purpose in bestowing mercy *on some* to cancel out the reality and finality of His wrath *on others*. Paul is clear here, as he is elsewhere: some people receive God's mercy and are saved, while others do not receive that mercy and so are eternally condemned. 'Prepared beforehand,' then, refers to the same thing as the word 'predestine' in 8:29: a decision of God in eternity past to bestow His mercy on certain individuals whom He in His sovereign design has chosen.

God allowed sin to enter the world not only to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known but also to demonstrate 'the riches of His glory' by bestowing His grace 'upon vessels of mercy' (cp. Eph. 2:6-7). The primary purpose of salvation is not the benefit it brings to those who are saved but rather the honor it brings to the God who saves them, by making 'known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy.' Believers are saved without any merit or work of their own, in order that God may have a means of displaying His glory, which is seen in the grace, the mercy, the compassion, and the forgiveness that He alone grants to those who come to Christ.

Who are the 'vessel of wrath' and 'vessel of mercy'? In verse 24 Paul makes clear who is the latter 'vessel.' The 'vessel of mercy' is the church of Jesus the Messiah, Jewish and Gentile believers. Who, then, are the former, the 'vessel of wrath'? It is composed of unresponsive

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Jews, ‘a vessel ... made for destruction,’ whom, however, God continues to bear ‘with much patience.’ This is not to say that God’s patience with unbelieving Israel has come to an end. Indeed, not. But that ‘patience’ was and is extended to provide opportunity for God, through gospel preaching, to call to Himself a new people drawn from the Jews and from the Gentiles. Paul provides Biblical substantiation for the inclusion first of the Gentiles, then of the Jews (see vv. 24-29).

Sometimes we wonder why God withholds judgment of the ungodly. It may be that He does it to better display His glory to the beloved. We must bow before God, realizing He has noble purposes we cannot see.

3. Summary on Predestination

Verses 14-23, while something of a parenthesis in Paul’s argument, contribute significantly to our understanding of Paul’s teaching in this chapter and to our conception of God. In the face of the accusation that his stress on the initiative of God in determining who would be His people turns God into an unjust tyrant, Paul retreats not one step. On the contrary, he goes on the offensive and strengthens his teaching about the unconstrained freedom of God in making choices that determine people’s lives. Paul also makes even clearer that the choices he is talking about have to do not just with historical roles but with eternal destinies. This text, then, gives further support (see 8:28-30) to the doctrine of unconditional election. It also supports, although more ambiguously, the doctrine of reprobation. Paul teaches that God has brought upon certain people whom He chooses on the basis of nothing but His own will a condition of spiritual stupor, a condition that leads to eternal condemnation.

Allusion in this part of chapter 9 to unbelieving Israel is muted but clear. So many Jews have failed to embrace the gospel because God has so willed it; as with Pharaoh, God has hardened them, and they are now vessels on whom God’s wrath rests.

Many critics of the doctrine of predestination supposedly coming to the defense of God’s justice, fail to acknowledge that every human being since the all has deserved nothing but God’s just condemnation to an eternity in hell. If God were to exercise *only His justice*, no person would ever be saved. It is therefore hardly unjust if, according to His sovereign grace, He chooses to elect some sinners for salvation. It is not, of course, that we can fully understand what God reveals about His sovereign election and predestination. It can only be accepted by faith, acknowledging its truth simply because God has revealed it to be true. As believers, we know that, in ourselves, we deserve only God’s rejection and condemnation. But we also know that, for His own sovereign reasons, God has elected us to be His children and, in His own time and way, brought us to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

The unfathomable truth that God chooses some men for salvation and others for destruction is not revealed to confuse us or upset us, and certainly not to tempt us to question the character of God’s person. That truth is given to demonstrate God’s glory and sovereignty to all men. It is also given to make believers thankful that He has chosen us, who, in ourselves, were not and are not more worthy of salvation than those who remain lost. In showing mercy and in judging sin, God makes no distinctions based on race, ethnic background, nationality, intelligence, or even moral or religious merit. He distinguishes only between those whom He has chosen and those whom He has not. That is a hard truth to accept, because it runs directly counter to man’s natural inclinations and standards. To the natural man it seems grossly unfair, and even the best taught and most faithful believer cannot fully explain it. But the truth is fully biblical. For those who

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receive God's Word as inerrant, there will always be a tension between fully acknowledging God's sovereign will and fully acknowledging His requirement of human faith. We can only believe what Scripture teaches, accepting in our hearts what we cannot explain with our minds.

We must never study the doctrine of predestination in the abstract. In the final analysis, although predestination certainly involves God's sovereignty—His omnipotence and omniscience—the doctrine is about the riches of God's glory. This doctrine more than any other reveals that grace really is amazing. From a corrupt mass of clay God chose to make vessels of glory. If you are in Christ Jesus, that is what God has done for you in His mercy and grace. He has made you a vessel of mercy that He prepared before the foundation of the world for His glory. We are bound from God's eternal plan for eternal glory in His family.

4. Summary on Lapsarianism

The debate between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism has to do with the relationship of God's decrees to election and the fall, particularly to the fall—the lapse of the human race into sin—hence the root of both terms, *Lapsarianism*. Both *supra* and *infra* deal with God's involvement with the fall and the order of God's decrees with respect to it and to election. Some think that those who hold to the doctrine of infralapsarianism claim that God's decree of election came after the fall, and those who hold to supralapsarianism claim that God's decrees of election came before the fall. That is a false distinction. Both sides understand that God's decrees regarding election and reprobation are rooted in eternity, before the foundation of the world—before Adam and Eve existed. The question is not *when* the decrees were executed by God in His eternal plan but rather the *order* of the decrees.

The infralapsarian position, held by the vast majority of historic Calvinists and Reformed theologians, claims that God's decree of election was made in view of the fall. When God makes from one batch of clay vessels fit for destruction and from another vessels fit for honor, it does not mean that He planned from eternity to make some people bad and other people redeemable. God applies His redeeming grace to a mass of humanity completely dead in sins and trespasses. The decree of electing grace is made in light of the fall. In fact, if it were not made in light of the fall, it would not be a decree of grace.

On the other side of the coin is the supralapsarian position, which teaches that God decreed the fall in light of His doctrine of election. God first elected certain people to salvation and others to reprobation, and in order to accomplish that eternal purpose, He decreed the fall of humanity. The purpose of the fall was to provide the necessary clay for God to choose some to salvation and others to reprobation. Supralapsarians say that God planned to save some and condemn others, and in order to make that possible, He consigned the whole world to ruin. Therefore, the purpose of the fall was to provide the necessary condition through which God shows His grace and wrath. That is problematic because it violates what we call the biblical *a priori*—God is not the author or creator of sin. God does not choose to create people in a fallen condition so that He can condemn them to eternal damnation. It is not God's purpose to force people to sin and then punish them for that sin.

I (RC Sproul) do not believe that God creates people wicked and then punishes them for their wickedness, nor is Paul teaching that here in Romans 9. At the same time, as Augustine said, in some sense God did ordain the fall. There are two reasons why God, in some sense, did ordain the fall. God's sovereignty is one reason. God is sovereign over nature and human history. He rules all things by His power and authority. He is sovereign over the disposition of His grace.

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Nothing can happen apart from God's sovereign action. Second, God has the authority and power to prevent anything from happening that does, in fact, happen. God can exercise His authority and power and sovereignty by stopping something from happening or by not stopping it. Those are God's options always in every way. Since the fall happened, God knew it was going to happen, and He could have prevented it, but He chose not to. His purpose in not stopping it, however, was not to provide Himself with a wicked batch of clay on which to exercise His sovereign decree of reprobation. Why God allowed it is something we cannot fully know. The answer Scripture gives is that somehow the lapse into sin, which produced a batch of fallen humanity and fragile, corrupt clay, was for His glory.

B. The People of God (Romans 9:24-29)

These verses return, after the excursus in vv. 14-23, to the theme of vv. 6-13; God's call is the sole basis for inclusion in the true people of God. Thus we encounter here again the characteristic vocabulary of that earlier paragraph: 'sons of God' (v. 26; cp. v. 8); 'seed' (v. 29; cp. vv. 7 & 8); and, especially, 'call' (vv. 24 & 26; cp. vv. 7 & 12). Another similarity is Paul's constant appeal to the OT for substantiation of his teaching. In vv. 6-13 Paul mined the patriarchal stories for his citations; now he turns to the prophets. It is probably Paul's intention to cite the OT in 9:26b-29 in the order of the canon, moving from the patriarchal narratives (vv. 7-13) to the events of the exodus (vv. 14-18) to the time of the prophets (vv. 21, 24-29).

While vv. 24-29 pick up the theme of vv. 6b-13, they also move beyond what Paul has said in vv. 6b-13. For Paul now explicitly includes Gentiles among those whom God is sovereignly calling to be part of His people. God's people are constituted by His call and not by natural descent. Paul now takes this point to its logical and (from the perspective of first-century Judaism) radical conclusion: physical descent from Abraham not only does not guarantee inclusion in the true people of God; it is not even necessary. Verses 14-23, despite their somewhat parenthetical nature, have prepared the way for this conclusion by highlighting so intensely God's absolute freedom to bestow His mercy on whomever He chooses. Verses 24-29, therefore, bring Paul's defense of God's faithfulness to His word to its climax. The small number of Jews who have responded to the gospel fits with the prophetic insistence that only a remnant of the people of Israel would be saved. And the inclusion of Gentiles within the eschatological people of God, while not so clearly predicted in the OT, conforms to God's character and actions as presented in the Scriptures.

1. God Calls Jews and Gentiles (9:24)

...²⁴ *even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?*

We may view v. 24 as the continuation of the sentence begun in vv. 22-23 or as a new sentence that continues in v. 25. Clearly those called in v. 24 are to be identified with the 'vessels of mercy' in v. 23, and some connection between vv. 22-23 and 24 must be retained. Still, it seems best to view v. 24 as beginning a new sentence (and, indeed, a new paragraph). Paul's focus here is not on the antecedents of God's calling or on its nature, but on its scope: God summons into relationship with Himself Gentiles as well as Jews. This is the point Paul supports with the OT quotations that follow.

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2. God Confirms His Call to Gentiles (9:25-26)

²⁵As 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.”” ²⁶“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.””

Paul’s OT support for the calling of Gentiles comes from ‘the book of Hosea.’ He quotes freely from Hos. 2:23 in v. 25 and then verbatim from the LXX version of Hos. 1:10a. Paul reminds us that Hosea was required to marry an adulterous woman and that their children’s names had symbolic significance. One child was called Lo-Ammi, which means in Hebrew ‘not my people.’ In that name God expressed His judgment against the ten tribes of Israel that had become apostate, but afterward: ‘I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved.’ The failure of one group became the occasion for God’s expanding His mercy to those outside the community.

Mercy has been extended to the Gentiles. The Jewish people, who had been the stewards of the oracles of God, had missed the coming of the Messiah. When we are adopted into the family of God, we experience an affection from God that we have no claim upon. There is nothing lovely in us in the sight of God, but He has been pleased in His mercy to call us His people, to adopt us into His family where we have no birthright or entitlement. In Christ He calls us His beloved.

Paul changes the sequence of the verses, reverses the order of the two clauses he cites from 2:23, and uses wording different from both the LXX and the MT. One of the key differences is Paul’s use of the verb ‘I will call’ in place of the more generic verb, ‘I will say,’ of both the Hebrew and Greek. This is almost certainly Paul’s own change since it matches exactly the point for which he adduces the quotations (cp. ‘call’ in v. 24). By reversing the order of the clauses in his quotation of Hos. 2:23, Paul is able to put this verb at the beginning of his composite quotation from Hosea. The same verb comes at the end of the quotation (in v. 26) – ‘they shall be called sons of the living God’ – indicating clearly where Paul’s stress lies.

A potentially more serious instance of what seems to be arbitrary hermeneutics on Paul’s part is his application of these Hosea texts to the calling of Gentiles. For the prophet Hosea is predicting a renewal of God’s mercy toward the rebellious northern tribes of Israel: those whom God rejected and named *lō-rhuamah*, ‘not pitied,’ and *lō-ami*, ‘not my people’ (the symbolic names given to Hosea’s children [1:6-9]), are again shown mercy and adopted again as God’s people. The problem disappears if Hosea is including the Gentiles in his prophecy, but this is unlikely. The explicit reference to Israel in the introduction to the Isaiah quotations in v. 27 suggests that Paul views the Hosea quotations as related to the calling of the Gentiles. Therefore, we must conclude that this text reflects a hermeneutical supposition for which we find evidence elsewhere in Paul and in the NT: that OT predictions of a renewed Israel find their fulfillment in the church. Moreover, Paul’s use of these texts may further his effort to break down the boundaries between the Jews and other peoples that were so basic to Jewish thinking.

3. God Confirms His Call to Jews (9:27-29)

a) Quotation of Isaiah 10:22-23 (9:27-28)

²⁷And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, ²⁸for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.’

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If Hosea speaks allusively to the situation of the Gentiles, Isaiah quite directly ‘cries out concerning Israel.’ Paul quotes in vv. 27-28 from Isaiah 10:22-23. His text is substantially that of the LXX, with only two exceptions worth noting. First, while the subject of the verb in the first clause in the LXX (and the MT) is ‘the people Israel,’ Paul has ‘the number of the sons of Israel.’ This exact phrase occurs in Hosea 1:10 (the verse Paul has just cited), so Paul’s paraphrase is a clever way to emphasize his juxtaposition of these two texts. Second, in v. 28 Paul omits several words found in the LXX of Is. 10:22b-23a. It may be that Paul’s Greek text did not have these words; or Paul may have omitted them because they were not integral to the point he wanted to draw out from the text.

Paul’s purpose in citing what Isaiah ‘cries out concerning Israel’ is not simply, or even mainly, to cite OT support for God’s calling of Jews to be His people – a point that hardly required substantiation. Rather, his purpose is to establish the truth that God is calling His ‘vessels of mercy’ *from among* Jews. He thereby ends this section on the note with which it began (vv. 6b-13); the OT itself shows that God chooses only some from among national Israel to be His true spiritual Israel. It is in this way that Paul reconciles the promise of God to Israel and the small number of Jewish Christians (see v. 6a). To establish the truth of God’s selectivity from within Israel, Paul cites texts from Isaiah that describe the important OT concept of the ‘remnant.’ Characteristic especially of the prophets, the remnant doctrine contains both a word of judgment and a word of hope.

The judgment consists in the fact that, though ‘the number of the sons of Israel be as the sands of the sea’ *only* ‘a remnant will be saved.’ In contrast to the smug self-assurance that the Lord’s covenant with Israel insured both the political integrity and spiritual vitality of the people as a whole, the Lord through His prophets announces doom for the people as a whole. For Paul, then, the remnant doctrine confirms his word of judgment to Israel: it is ‘not all who are of Israel who are truly Israel’ (v. 6b).

The note of hope in the prophetic remnant doctrine consists in God’s promise that, despite the widespread disobedience of His people, ‘a remnant *will* be saved.’ God’s promise to reserve a remnant signals His continuing faithfulness to His people, however faithless they may have been. That Paul wants us to hear this note in the remnant doctrine also is clear both from the connection between these quotations and v. 24 and from his development of the remnant teaching in chapter 11, where the existence of a remnant (11:1-10), he suggests, is laden with hope for the future of Israel (see esp. 11:16a).

b) *Quotation of Isaiah 1:9 (9:29)*

²⁹*And as Isaiah predicted, ‘If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.’*

Paul ends with a further word of prediction from Isaiah. Paul cites Isaiah 1:9 exactly according to the LXX, which faithfully renders the MT. What undoubtedly drew Paul’s attention to this text was the word ‘seed’ (*sperma*), which was so key in vv. 7-9. While, however, the tone in vv. 7-9 was mainly negative (among all the descendants only those whom God ‘reckons’ as seed will be saved), here it is positive: God’s ‘leaving’ a seed means that he will not allow Israel’s rebellion to bring her to the same annihilation experienced by Sodom and Gomorrah. This concluding note of hope paves the way for chapter 11.

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‘Lord of Sabaoth’ is often translated ‘Lord of hosts’ and refers to God’s all-encompassing lordship of the universe, of everything He has created. ‘Posterity’ translates *sperma*, which literally means ‘seed’ sperm.

Are there many from Israel who will be shown the divine mercy in Paul’s time? At present Paul does not envisage a vast harvest from among the elect nation, as the quotations from Isaiah show. Clearly, then, Paul sees only a ‘remnant’ of Israel, a few survivors who are currently finding the salvation of God.

C. The Righteousness of God (Romans 9:30-33)

The rhetorical question ‘What then shall we say?’ signifies that 9:30-10:21 (like 9:14-23) takes up an issue raised by the main line of Paul’s teaching in 9:16-13, 24-29. As 9:30b-31 reveal, this issue is the surprising turn of salvation history Paul has sketched in 9:24-29; Gentiles, once ‘not a people,’ are now entering into the people of God; Israel, blessed and given so many privileges, is failing to act on her privileges and experience salvation in Christ. As Paul has already explained, this situation is due to the sovereign determination of God. But in 9:30-21, he argues that it is also the result of human response. The manifestation of God’s eschatological righteousness in Christ has been met by Gentiles with faith, by Israel (generally) with disobedience and unbelief. But Gentile inclusion continues (as in 9:6-29) to be the subordinate note, as Paul continues to explore the problem of Israel’s exclusion.

The key word in 9:30-10:13 is ‘righteousness’ (*dikaiosynē*), which occurs ten times. Throughout this passage, Paul returns (after using the term to refer to moral righteous in chapters 6-9) to the forensic meaning of righteousness that he established in chapters 1-4: the ‘right’ standing with God that is the product of God’s justifying work in Christ. Earlier in the letter Paul devoted considerable time to showing that a person could experience this right standing with God only through faith (1:17; 3:21-4:25). He now uses this cardinal gospel truth to explain why so many Gentiles, previously excluded from God’s covenant concern, are being saved, while most Jews, the recipients of God’s blessing and promises, find themselves estranged from God.

Gentiles are being included in God’s true spiritual people because they are experiencing a righteousness that is now available to anyone who believes (10:4b, 11-13). Most Jews, on the other hand, are finding themselves outside this true people of God because they are wrongly preoccupied with the other, false, kind of righteousness. They have persisted in seeking to work out their relationship with God through the law (9:31; 10:3, 5) and the works it demands (9:32a; 10:5). They have therefore missed the climax of salvation history, ‘stumbling’ over Jesus Christ (9:32b-33), the embodiment of God’s righteousness (10:3), climax of the law (10:4), and focus of God’s word of grace in the new age of redemptive history (10:6-8).

In this paragraph (9:30-33) Paul uses a critical feature of the gospel – the indispensability of faith in attaining a right relationship with God (cp. 3:27-4:25) – to explain the current state of affairs in salvation history. It is by their faith that Gentiles have attained a righteous status with God (v. 30); and it is because of their lack of faith that Israel has failed to attain the righteousness that the law demanded (vv. 31-32a). By means of a composite quotation from Is. 8:14 and 28:16, Paul shows that Israel’s failure is ultimately Christological: by failing to believing in Him, He has become for Israel the cause of their downfall (vv. 32b-33). This paragraph bears an importance out of proportion to its length. It announces the themes that Paul will develop in the rest of chapter 10, and its interpretation will therefore set the direction for our understanding of many of

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the debated points in that chapter – especially the nature of Israel’s failure with respect to the law.

Earlier, Paul placed his emphasis on the divine will in determining in advance the call of God. Now, however, he approaches the question from the viewpoint of human attitudes and behavior, first of the Gentiles, then of the Jews (vv. 30-31).

1. Gentiles Attained Righteousness (9:30)

³⁰*What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith;*

Paul uses the question ‘What then shall we say?’ as a rhetorical device to introduce an implication of his teaching in 9:6b-29 (and esp. vv. 24-29): ‘Therefore, in the light of God’s calling of Gentiles and of only some Jews, what do we find now to be the case?’ Verses 30b-32a give the answer to this question, which is then expanded in 9:32b-10:21. Paul’s response comes in two coordinate and parallel clauses, the first focusing on Gentiles (v. 30b) and the second on Israel (v. 31).

Paul is not implying that Gentiles are saved on a different basis than Jews. He is simply stating the human requirement for salvation that has always been the only means of attaining the ‘righteousness’ that is necessary for salvation—‘the righteousness which is by faith.’ Paul is not saying, of course, that the pagan Gentiles naturally sought God’s righteousness through faith. Whether Jew or Gentile, the natural man *never* seeks God by his own independent choice.

We receive the benefits of the gospel even though we never sought them. It is not in our nature to pursue the things of God. The Gentiles, to whom Paul is writing here in Romans, had no clue about the history of redemption. They were not concerned with studying the Old Testament Scriptures. They did not care about the Law of Moses; they were not pursuing the righteousness of God. In God’s mercy they found what they had not pursued. God found you and me. We were not looking; we were not pursuing. By His grace He pursued us, and we were found. That is the Christian message: ‘I once was lost but now am found.’

Paul describes Gentiles, as a class, as ‘not seeking righteousness.’ The fact – as Paul well knows – that many Gentiles in his day were earnest and diligent in their pursuit of moral ‘uprightness’ is one indication that the ‘righteousness’ Paul speaks of here is not moral righteousness but forensic righteousness: a right standing before God. How have Gentiles attained this status when they were not even seeking it? First, as Paul explains in an appositive phrase, the righteousness that Gentiles have attained is a righteousness ‘that comes by faith.’ And faith, as Paul has made clear earlier in the letter (1:16; 3:28-29) and will emphasize again (10:11-13), is a response that any person, Jew or Gentile, can make. But, second, Paul undoubtedly wants us to see the Gentiles’ attainment of a righteous status with God without their having sought it as a specific and important example of the principle that he has enunciated in his previous argument: belonging to the people of God ‘is not a matter of the person who wills or the person who runs, but of the God who shows mercy’ (9:16).

The Gentile nations were not known for their pursuit of righteousness. Indeed, their unrighteousness was a scandal to Jews. To them, the words ‘Gentile’ and ‘sinner’ were synonymous (cp. Gal. 2:15: ‘we...are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners’). Yet, ironically, Gentiles have proved open to the gospel of Christ crucified and risen. Many have believed and

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been reckoned ‘righteous’ by God. By contrast, Jews have been preoccupied with Law, which, however, they have failed to keep (see 2:17-24). They have spurned God’s gracious gift.

2. Jews Have Not Attained Righteousness (9:31-32a)

³¹*but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.* ³²*Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.*

How can it be, Paul asks, that those outside the redemptive historical covenant community found the pearl of great price while those on the inside missed it? ‘He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him’ (Jn. 1:11).

The situation of Israel, Paul emphasizes, exhibits a complete contrast to that of the Gentiles he has described in v. 30. The Gentiles, who were ‘not pursuing,’ have ‘attained’; Israel, which *was* ‘pursuing,’ has not ‘arrived at its goal.’ The deliberate parallelism between the verses would lead us to expect that Paul would make ‘righteousness’ the goal of Israel’s pursuit. Instead, however, we find in v. 31 the phrase ‘law of righteousness’ (*nomen dikaiosynēs*). We should understand the phrase to mean ‘the law whose object is righteousness’: the law ‘promises’ righteousness when its demands are met. ‘Law,’ therefore, remains the topic of Paul’s teaching throughout this verse and a half, but law conceived as a means to righteousness. As a result, the term ‘righteousness’ also remains very much in the forefront of Paul’s thinking throughout. We may paraphrase: ‘Israel, pursuing a law that promised righteousness, did not attain that law. For what reason did Israel not attain the law that promises righteousness? Because Israel pursued that law that promises righteousness not on the basis of faith but as if it could have been attained on the basis of works.’

Pursue is from *diōkō*, which means to run swiftly after something, and was therefore frequently used of hunting. It was also used metaphorically of earnestly seeking a desired goal or objective. The implication for Jews was that they did not ‘pursue...the righteousness which is by faith,’ but instead relied on their birthright as Jews or on their supposed good works in obedience to God’s law. But no person has ever been saved, at any time, under any dispensation or covenant, on any other basis than faith exercised in response to God’s gracious call. In fact, when the gospel came through Christ, far more Gentiles than Jews believed. The greatest obstacle to salvation is self-righteousness. The person who thinks he is already righteous and pleases God will see no need for salvation. Because most Jews thought they had satisfied God by their Jewishness or their works righteousness, they felt no need for the gospel of grace through faith. What a tragic commentary on a wasted effort. God’s righteousness cannot be achieved by human works, because they are always sin-tainted and fall short of God’s perfect and holy standard.

Paul therefore explains in v. 32a why Israel’s pursuit of this ‘law for righteousness’ failed: because she sought to ‘fulfill’ that law by works rather than by faith. Now Paul has nothing in principle against Israel’s seeking to do the law: he elsewhere makes clear that the law legitimately demands works. Why then does he appear to condemn it here? For two reasons.

The first and probably primary reason why Paul condemns Israel’s pursuit of ‘the law of righteousness’ becomes clear when we take into account the Christological emphasis of vv. 32b-33: Israel’s failure came because she ‘stumbled over’ Christ, refusing to put faith in Him. Here Paul suggests that it was not only the *manner* of Israel’s pursuit of ‘the law of righteousness’ that was misguided; her very choice of a goal was wrong also. Israel had chosen to keep her focus on the law, seeking to find righteousness through it, when Christ, the culmination of that law and

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the only source of righteousness, has already come (see 10:4). For it is only in Christ that the demand of the law is fully met; and only, therefore, by accepting Him in faith that a person can find the righteousness that the law promises (3:31; 8:4).

Second, Paul's point is not simply that Israel was pursuing the law; she was pursuing the law *in terms of its promise of righteousness*. Yet Paul has been at pains earlier in the letter to demonstrate that the law's promise of righteousness (2:13) could never be activated in practice (3:20) because of human sin (3:9). Israel has failed to achieve a law that could confer righteousness because she could not produce those works that would be necessary to meet the law's demands and so secure the righteousness it promises.

Paul is saying that the Israelites' focus on 'Law' (v. 31), that is, on 'works' (v. 32), excluded their focus on 'faith,' or as he will now say, on the *object* of faith. The 'object' he refers to is 'the Stone.'

3. Quotation of Isaiah 8:14 / 28:16 (9:32b-33)

They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,³³ as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

The exclusivity of Christ is the premise of Paul's next point. For Christ is that 'stone' which God has placed in Zion: the foundation for the new people of God: the keystone in the plan of salvation. Yet rather than building on that stone, putting their faith in it, Israel has stumbled over it. On the one hand, Paul argues that Israel has missed Christ, the culmination of the plan of God, because she has focused too narrowly on the law. Israel is like a person walking a path, whose eyes are so narrowly focused downward on the path itself that she trips over a stone in the middle of that path. On the other hand, Israel's failure to perceive in Christ the end and goal of the path she has been walking leads her to continue on that path after it had served its purpose.

Paul's reference to the Christ as the 'Stone' depends on a number of passages from Isaiah that mention the 'stone,' passages that had been collected from early times (most likely following Jesus' own reference to Himself as 'the stone the builders rejected' – Mark 12:10, quoting Ps. 118:22). It is evident that the 'stone' is a metaphor for a man. Paul sees these oracles about the man-'stone' as fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah and the varying attitudes – negative and positive – of the people to Him. The people of Israel do one of two things to the messianic 'Stone' God sets among them. They 'stumble' on, that is, they reject the 'Stone' or they 'believe on' the 'Stone.'

The 'stone' imagery Paul uses in v. 32b comes from two passages in Isaiah, as the quotation in v. 33 reveals. Paul's quotation is a conflation of two texts that both speak about a 'stone': Is. 28:16 and 8:14. The former text reads: 'Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: "One who trusts will not panic."' Some Jews before Paul's day were already apparently identifying the stone with the Messiah. Isaiah 8:14, on the other hand, is a prediction of judgment on Israel, warning that they would stumble and fall over the Lord Himself: "He [the LORD of hosts; cp. v. 13] will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel He will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.' Since these same passages are quoted together in 1 Peter 2:6-8, it is likely that early Christians before Paul's time had already combined them in a 'stone *testimonium*.' (A third 'stone' passage, Ps. 118:22, is quoted in Mt. 21:42 and parallels and may have been a third member of the 'stone testimonia'.)

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However, the particular way they are conflated here is probably Paul's own work. By replacing the middle of Is. 28:16 with a phrase from Is. 8:14, he brings out the negative point about Israel's fall that is his main point in this context. At the same time, by including the reference to Is. 28:16, he lays the foundation for the positive exposition of Christ as a 'stone' that he will develop in chapter 10 (see esp. v. 11). The quotation concluding chapter 9, therefore, provides a significant Christological basis for Paul's continuing discussion of Israel's failure and the Gentiles' inclusion in chapter 10. At the same time, it contributes significantly to Paul's concern to demonstrate that Israel's exclusion from God's people as a result of the gospel does not constitute a departure from the OT. Quite the contrary, Paul here implies: Israel's stumbling over Christ was predicted in the OT.

Paul here paints a mental picture of a roadway with a great stone (representing Christ) placed right in the middle and all humanity streaming toward it. Those who are pursuing righteousness by works refuse to see it and stumble over it headlong to destruction, but others come and rest on it in faith and thus find salvation.

The one whom God appointed as the cornerstone of His kingdom became a stumbling block, a stone of offense. Israel tripped over grace. They fell over their Messiah because they could not fathom receiving God's favor apart from their righteousness. The multitudes in Israel sought the righteousness of God through their endeavors and missed the kingdom of God, and that same error is deeply ingrained in churches all over the world. In all likelihood, at least 80 percent of Christian church members in our country believe that they can get to heaven through their good works. This has been the issue all the way through Romans. Whose righteousness matters? Whose righteousness justifies? Not ours. The tragedy for the Jewish nation is that they sought the kingdom of God on their righteousness so they missed their Messiah. They did not seek it by faith but by the work of the law. They stumbled at the stumbling stone.

4. Summary

At heart the Jewish problem was *Christology*, the messianic 'Stone,' Jesus. So focused were they on religious patriotism expressed in 'Law' and its various 'works' that they failed to identify Jesus as the 'Stone' God had set among them. The same trajectory of unbelief continued on from Jesus into the apostolic age, including in the ministry of Paul to them. There were exceptions, however. Jesus' immediate disciples who became the college of the Twelve, numerous believers and church members in Judea and Galilee, the former persecutor Saul/Paul, were each Israelites. God's word of promise had not failed altogether (see 11:1-6).

'Faith' and 'works,' then, are not theological abstractions. 'Faith' is the dynamic recognition that Jesus is the Christ, the 'Stone' God set among His people to whom they are to 'come' and in whom they are to 'believe' for 'righteousness.' By contrast, 'works' of the 'Law' are the manifold expressions of Judaism – ritual, ceremony, laws and ethics – upon which Jews depended for their acceptance as 'righteous' with God.

God's demand for faith on the part of men is in no way inconsistent with His sovereignty. By His own sovereign decree, His gracious offer of salvation becomes effective only when it is willingly received by faith. In regard to salvation, the other side of divine sovereignty is human responsibility. From the human standpoint there is a tension, even a seeming contradiction, between these two realities. By human reasoning, they seem mutually exclusive. But both of them are clearly taught in God's Word, and when one is emphasized to the exclusion of the other, the gospel is invariably perverted. By His own determination, God *will not save* a person

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who does not believe in His Son, and a person *cannot save* himself simply by the act of his own will, no matter how sincere and heartfelt. In God's sovereign order, both His gracious provision and the exercise of man's will are required for salvation.

Paul has been emphasizing divine choice, but now presents us with human responsibility. There are two wrong responses to all this. One is, 'I'll do it myself. Somehow I'll make it, by hook or by crook.' The end of this attitude is to fall headlong into destruction. The other response is to say, 'God will do everything, I'll do nothing.' This too will end in destruction. But there is a third, correct response, and that is: 'I stand on the Rock that is higher than I.' The Scriptures never say, 'Try to determine whether you are elect.' They say rather: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31), and 'But to all who did *receive* Him, who *believed* in His name, He gave the right to become children of God' (Jn. 1:12). Have you really trusted Christ? Have you believed in Him? Are you resting in Him?

For next time: Read Romans 10:1-13.