

## Romans Part 31 – Chapter 9:20-33

Sunday, November 13, 2022

With input from <https://www.bibleref.com/Romans/9>

Paul has shown us in Chapter 9 the difference between the Old Covenant (Moses) and the New Covenant (Jesus) and that God will do as He pleases. Paul quotes Malachi then makes this statement:

### **Romans 9:18-19**

*18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.*

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

We now move on to verses 20-33:

### **Romans 9:20-21**

*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?” 21 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?*

Paul now asks us some hard questions. He has imagined that we are responding to the example of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, yet still holding Pharaoh at fault, with questions about God's fairness. This is a normal human reaction; if a person somehow "forced" another into something, we'd consider it outrageous to hold the coerced person responsible.

But Paul turns the question back on mankind: Who are we, as mortal human beings, to answer back to God? God is the One who molded Adam from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7) and who puts all of us together in our mother's womb (Psalm 139:13). Can the one who is molded talk back to the One who molded him and demand he ought to have been made in some other way?

The assumed answer, of course, is no. Created things don't talk back to their maker. Neither do human beings have the right to moralize to their Creator about His choices. He is God. We are not. As crippling as it might be to our own sense of pride, we must start with the realization that God has no obligation to us. He owes us nothing: not mercy, not love, not grace. That, in fact, is one reason the gospel is so incredible. The love and mercy God shows to us, in providing for our salvation, is something absolutely and completely unearned and undeserved.

We can't appreciate the depths of that kind of love until we accept the fact that it's entirely unnecessary on God's part.

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

This is a difficult verse both in its subject matter and because it forces translation choices for scholars trying to adapt the text into English. In the previous verse, Paul made the case that God can do as He

wishes with any human being. He pointed out that a potter could take the same lump of clay and make either containers for "honorable" purposes or ones for "dishonorable" purposes. The implication was that God has every right to do the same with people, whom He created with even more authority than a potter who molds clay.

Now Paul asks a question about God's actions towards vessels prepared for destruction. What if God desires to show His wrath and power towards them, but has instead patiently endured these vessels—the reason being described in the following verse?

Paul seems to mean by these "vessels" all those who will not receive God's mercy. These are those who will instead be separated from Him forever in hell. These vessels—these people—are objects of God's anger. This is one area where theology and doctrine begin to take different views of Paul's meaning. Is God patiently enduring these persons until the time comes for them to be destroyed? Or, is God patiently enduring to make time for some to repent and be revealed as the "vessels of mercy" described in the following verse? Bible teachers disagree based both on translation and doctrinal beliefs.

It is interesting to note that, in Ephesians 2, Paul refers to himself as having previously been a child of wrath: We "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:3–5). Some take that, along with verses such as 2 Peter 3:9, as evidence for the idea that God's "patience" is aimed at mercifully giving some of these unsaved persons more time to repent.

In either case, Paul seems to be making two larger points. First, God is the Maker, and he has the right to make people to serve His own purposes. Secondly, God endures with great patience even those people who are destined for destruction. In the following verses, Paul explains how God mercifully makes known the riches of His glory to all of those whom He calls to be in Christ.

*24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? 25 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.’”*

*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.’”*

What if God, the potter, purposefully made some to be vessels of wrath, explicitly prepared for destruction? However, what if He endured with much patience those vessels even though He desired to show His wrath and power?

More specifically, Paul asks, now completing the thought, what if God endures those vessels of wrath with patience, not yet destroying them, in order to make known the riches of His glory for the vessels of mercy? He finished by stating that the vessels of mercy have been prepared beforehand for glory. That last thought fits with what Paul wrote in the previous chapter about all of those who are in Christ (Romans 8:31–39). God predestined, called, justified, and will glorify all who come to Him by faith in Christ.

Paul's main idea here, though, seems to be this: God's relationship to "vessels of wrath" somehow serves His purpose to reveal His glory to the "vessels created for mercy." He will use the destruction of the dishonorable vessels to accomplish His purpose of mercy for those in Christ.

Theological difference aside, we can take certain universal points away from this. Some vessels—some people—are destined for destruction and will suffer God's wrath, which all people deserve because of sin (Romans 3:10; 3:23). Other vessels—other persons—will be shown mercy, even though they also deserve wrath because of God's merciful work through Christ. However the choice is made, or how the details might work, God will call people to faith in Christ—He will elect, or predestine—anyone He wants to. He will hold all others responsible for not trusting in Christ. Not only is this just, it's also merciful, and entirely within His rights as the Creator. He is God.

Once again, Paul reaches back into the history of Israel, preserved in the Scriptures, to support his argument. He has been showing that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Romans 9:6), in addition to insisting that God has chosen to show His mercy to some who are not Israel: to Gentiles.

Here he quotes from a passage (Hosea 2:23) originally written about God's commitment to one day restore the exiled northern ten tribes of Israel. Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul applies Hosea's text to Gentiles, as well as Jews. Peter appears to have more loosely done a similar thing in 1 Peter 2:10.

In Paul's context, to those who were once not God's people and were not "beloved" by Him, He has now declared to be His people. He calls them "beloved." In this way, God has exercised His right to show mercy on whom He will show mercy, including the Gentiles.

*27 And 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, 28 for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay."*

First, God has kept His promise to Abraham. The sons of Israel have become as the sands of the sea (Genesis 22:17). That promise did not obligate God, however, to eternally save every son and daughter of Israel. In fact, Isaiah writes that only a remnant will be saved.

This and the following verses bring us back around to where Paul began this chapter. God does and will continue to keep His promises to His chosen nation Israel. However, He will not show the same mercy to every descendant of Abraham, as many of the Jews assumed. They must come to Him through faith in Christ to be saved from the penalty of their sin, and a remnant of Israelites will do just that.

*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."*

*30 What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; 31 but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.*

Paul quoted from Isaiah 10 to prove several points. First, God has kept His promises to Israel. Second, God never promised to eternally save everyone physically born into Israel. Third, God has called out a remnant from among the Jews to be saved through faith in Christ.

Now Paul emphasizes this idea that a remnant will be saved; highlighting the fact that God has not and will not wipe out Israel completely no matter how faithless she has been, by quoting from Isaiah 1:9. Sodom and Gomorrah were judged by God so severely that they were utterly removed from the earth (Genesis 19:24–25). With Israel, though, the Lord of hosts has always spared some from the next generation to carry on as Israel, no matter how severe God's judgment became.

Paul is making the significant claim that God will continue to spare a remnant, now by calling some of the Jewish people out from among the rest through faith in Christ.

*32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. 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.”*

Now Paul answers the simple question "why?" with an equally simple answer. He writes that the Jewish people did not seek to be made righteous by faith. They wanted God to declare them righteous based on their works, on their ability to keep the law. As Paul has shown throughout Romans, nobody can keep the law (Romans 3:10; 3:23), so nobody can demonstrate their righteousness to God in that way.

In seeking to be justified by their own works, by their own behavior, Paul writes that most Israelites have "stumbled over the stumbling stone." Paul will make clear in the following verse that this stumbling stone is Jesus Christ.