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Romans

But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Romans 9:20

This verse is speaking of the sovereignty of God concerning His creatures. This is obvious when looked at from the surrounding verses and even when quoted in its entirety. However, far too often, only a portion of it is cited in a way which twists its meaning and intent, "Who are you to reply against God?" This is done in order to buttress one's preconceptions about a matter, perhaps the doctrines of the Bible. Example -

Sergiopolous - "Predestination means that God chooses us and that we have no say in the matter. Free will is excluded.

Dwyerinius - "That's simply not correct. Predestination in no way negates our free-will; in fact, it highlights it."

Sergiopolous - "Who are you to reply against God?"

If you hear someone quote this verse in this way, ignore his argument. You will never change his mind when he believes he is speaking for God, on God's behalf. The argument will merely follow this useless path until frustration takes over.

This verse, as noted, is speaking of the sovereignty of God concerning us. On Judgment Day, Pharaoh won't be able to use an argument against God's sovereign decisions which related to him. He may say, "You raised me up and hardened my heart in order to demonstrate Your glory. And, in fact, You were glorified through

me. Therefore, You owe me... big time. You can't condemn me." Just as this won't work with Pharaoh, the same will be true with all of God's wayward creatures.

Paul begins with, "But indeed." This is in response to the proposed statement of verse 9:19 -

"Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

To show that this argument will go precisely nowhere, Paul's next words are "O man." The conversation is one between a finite, fallen being and the infinitely wise and glorious Creator. Which has the right to question? Which has the right to rule? Which has the authority to judge as is fitting the position? "Certainly not you, O man. Who are you to reply against God."

Job, the man of patience and one who walked in a blameless and upright manner before God, thought he had a reason to question the Almighty. However, God addressed him at length with questions to which Job had no answer. Finally Job exclaimed -

"Behold, I am vile;
What shall I answer You?
I lay my hand over my mouth.
Once I have spoken, but I will not answer;
Yes, twice, but I will proceed no further." Job 40:4, 5

But God continued to challenge him, showing him that He has a right to conduct His affairs as He sees fit and good. After this second line of questions, Job responded again -

"I know that You can do everything,
And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.

You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?'
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
Listen, please, and let me speak;
You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.'

"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye sees You.
Therefore I abhor myself,
And repent in dust and ashes." Job 42:2-6

If Job, whom God recognized as one who is "blameless and upright" had no right to challenge God, how much more any others who willfully reject Him? There is no challenge, and no right to challenge, which can stand up against the sovereign Creator. This includes the question, "Why have you made me like this?" God chose our time, place, and position for His reasons. We merely have to accept that those things were beyond our control.

It is He who formed us and therefore He has the right to do so in whatever manner, location, and time that He so chooses. As humans, we are unqualified to understand the subjects of the questions. He is infinite in wisdom and therefore we can only understand Him in His being in a limited way. He is infinite in His existence and therefore we cannot understand His plan as it is conceived from beginning to end. And He is infinite in His power and so we cannot understand Him in the force which He exerts when executing His plan.

He is God; we are man.

Life application: Be careful how you question God. If you don't understand what is happening and you desire to ask, do it in humility and without words of accusation or condemnation. Such words can only turn around and highlight your own sinful nature.

Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? Romans 9:21

The concept of the potter and the clay is found in many instances throughout Scripture. Not quoting some of the relevant verses would be a loss, so we will cite and briefly evaluate a few. In Isaiah, we are shown that by speaking against the one who forms the clay, we "have things turned around." -

"Surely you have things turned around!
Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay;
For shall the thing made say of him who made it,
'He did not make me'?
Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it,
'He has no understanding'"? Isaiah 29:16

What thing which is created can speak against the One who creates? It is illogical and arrogant. Isaiah precisely defines who is who in the next verse -

"But now, O Lord,
You are our Father;
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all we are the work of Your hand." Isaiah 64:8

The Lord (Jehovah) is a Father to His people. As the One who called His chosen people, Isaiah acknowledges that they can be taken and formed as He sees fit. They are the work of His hand and therefore they are at His mercy in all respects.

One final example from the Old Testament was given to Israel as a reminder of this -

"Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the

potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make." Jeremiah 18:3, 4

The clay was created by God and the forming of that clay is at His discretion. Paul, in the New Testament, uses this same terminology to again show us that God is sovereign over His creation. But why is this such a common theme and where does it find its roots? The answer is that it goes back to the very beginning of man's time on earth. In Genesis 2, we see the following -

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." (7)

"And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man." (21, 22)

Man was formed from the dust of the earth by the Potter. Take a handful of dust, add in water, and one has clay. The man was molded, the man was formed, the man became a living being. After this, a portion of that clay was taken to form the woman as the Potter saw fit to shape and form. So let us ask some questions about Adam and Eve –

Did God or Adam decide that he would be a man?

Did God or Adam decide his weight?

Did God or Adam decide the time of his creation?

Did God or Adam determine his foot size?

etc.

Did God or Eve decide that she would come from man?

Did God or Eve determine her hair color?

Did God or Eve decide she would have white or red teeth?

etc.

Such questions could go on infinitely. Every minute detail of the time, place, and form of Adam and Eve was decided and followed through with by God. Even the fact that Adam would be male and Eve a female. Now that the pattern is set, it asks us to accept our lot in these matters. Women are women and men are men. Rejecting this then is an affront to the Creator.

The same is true with our culture, our skin color, the family we were born into, etc. These things were decided by God before He spoke the universe into existence. Our genetic makeup comes from our parents and theirs from their parents...leading all the way back to our first parents.

God, as the great Potter, has the "power over the clay." Because of His wisdom and His foreknowledge concerning a plan, which is so vast and detailed that we can only see a miniscule part of it, He has determined from this "same lump (Adam) to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor."

Considering this, it must be stated that from within this lump also came all the genetic makeup for the human side of Jesus. The "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" implies that everything leading to that Lamb had to be known in advance. Every human interaction and every man and woman who would unite to bring another child into the world was factored in. This included the union between brothers and sisters, fathers and daughters, kings and prostitutes, Jews and gentiles.

Does the Potter have power over the clay? The answer is, "Yes, O God. Your plan will come about, because You are the Potter and we are the clay."

Life application: You have been blessed with life at a particular moment in history. Your sex, height, skin color, etc. was all chosen to bring glory to God. Go forth and be an acceptable jar of clay, filled with God's Holy Spirit, even to overflowing, that others may glorify God when they see you.

What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,... Romans 9:22

Here in today's verse we see the first portion of a train of thought which could easily be confused with the doctrine known as double-predestination - God creating some for destruction and some for salvation. One would have to ignore the vast body of evidence to the contrary to come to this conclusion though.

It should be noted that a contrast is being made between those who will receive mercy and those who won't. This shows us, quite clearly, that there are two groups of people on earth - the lost and the saved; sinners and saints. If "all have sinned" as the Bible shows us to be true (Romans 3:23) then all were once lost. The category of the saints is one which is received after being a part of the category of the lost - and none deserved to be saved. Therefore, when Paul says, "What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known" he is saying that it is something which is deserved on all people. We can go to Ephesians 2:3 to confirm this -

"...among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others."

Understanding that we were all under God's wrath, we can now put in context the second half of this verse (which is cited as a validation of his comments about Pharaoh). God "endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction." The term "much longsuffering" indicates that God was extremely patient with these people, allowing them to continue on when they only deserved

destruction. But remember again, we also were "children of wrath" and so this is speaking of us as much as it is of Pharaoh or anyone else who has existed.

God has spared us, despite our fallen and rebellious state. During this time, he offered to us His pardon and, being saved, we must have accepted it. God likewise offered the Pharaoh temporal pardon. "Let my people go" indicates that if Pharaoh obliged, he wouldn't have been destroyed. It also allows that Pharaoh could have said, "If these are Your people, and You are God, then I will join to Your people." Proof of this is found in Ruth 1:16, 17 -

“Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The Lord do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me.”

Ruth was in the same boat as Pharaoh (the boat we all were in) until she made her eternity-changing decision. Before she was a vessel of God's mercy, she was a vessel prepared for destruction. Pharaoh had a choice to make and he chose unwisely. Double-predestination cannot be found in this verse. Nor can be found the concept of monergism (salvation apart from free-will).

Life application: When you see the lost, know that this means more than a casual concept of "not going to heaven." Instead, it means that they are vessels prepared for destruction. How can you willingly hold back the good news which will bring them life when such a fate is otherwise assured?

...and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,... Romans 9:23

This verse contrasts what was just said in 9:22 -

"What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction."

It should be noted that "prepared" in 9:22 is a completely different word than in 9:23. The words are *katērtismena* and *proētoimasen*. The use of the two differing words shows us that those who were prepared for glory were placed in this category in a different manner than those who were fitted for destruction. In other words, the concept of double-predestination cannot be found in these verses. In fact, it shows that the two results came about in an entirely different way.

What needs to be remembered is where these two groups came from - the same lump (v21). The potter makes two jars. One goes to a king's palace where it holds perfume. The other goes to a shop where it is filled with used cooking oil. The question is, does he make the two jars, deciding in advance which will be used in which location, or does he make the pots the same - one going to one location and one the other? In this instance, the use of two different words favors the latter. Both are of the same lump, but one ends in an ignoble use and will be destroyed after use. It will be taken out and tossed in the dump - it is fitted for destruction. The other ends in a noble use and so it will be kept and refilled as time goes by. Someday maybe it will be placed in a fine art museum - it is prepared for glory.

But what if both of them were bought by the same person in the king's castle and both were used for perfume. Then both of them would have been "prepared for glory." Albert Barnes notes the distinction between the two -

"We are here brought to a remarkable difference between God's mode of dealing with them and with the wicked. Here it is expressly affirmed that God himself had prepared them for glory. In regard to the wicked, it is simply affirmed that they "were fitted" for destruction, without affirming anything of the agency by which it was done. That God prepares his people for glory - commences and continues the work of their redemption - is abundantly taught in the Scriptures..."

In the Bible, ever since Adam's transgression, "destruction" is seen as the default setting for humanity. We are all "fitted" for destruction. When the change in nature occurs by accepting God's provision (such as when the Hebrew Abraham "believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" or when Guirinopolous Lanciavinus the Roman called on Jesus as Lord and believed in his heart that God raised Him from the dead) our default setting of being fitted for destruction changes to being prepared for glory.

With this in view, we can see why God would want to endure "with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction." The reason is that they can, in fact, find mercy if they pursue it. By doing so "He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy."

There will be no thought of injustice when judgment comes upon the wicked because it is where all are headed. But when the jars receive God's provision, they are filled with God's Holy Spirit and are thus spared from what is justly due. They receive His mercy and are prepared for glory. There can be found nothing unjust in how God deals with His people because He has dealt in a completely fair manner with all of them.

Life application: Understanding that all of us are under the same sentence of condemnation can help us to see that God is completely fair in how He deals with man. We can't blame God for giving any of us what we already deserve. However, if God bestows upon us His grace and mercy, then we can't take any credit for that either.