

Romans: The Good News of God

Why Does God Still Blame Us?

Romans 9:19-29

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Scripture

Today I'd like to continue our study in Romans 9, one of the most difficult chapters in the entire Bible. Let me say how glad I am that God has allowed me to preach these difficult truths to you. You have not resisted the clear teaching of God's word, but you have embraced it for what it is—the word of the living God.

Let's read Romans 9:19-29:

¹⁹You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” ²⁰But 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?” 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? ²²What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— ²⁴even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? 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.’ ”

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.” ²⁹And as Isaiah predicted,

“If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah.” (Romans 9:19-29)

Introduction

Each of chapters 9, 10, and 11 begins with a personal statement by the apostle Paul, in which he identifies himself with the people of Israel and expresses profound concern for them. To him Israel's unbelief is far more than an intellectual problem. He writes of the sorrow and anguish he feels over them (9:1-5), of his prayerful longing for their salvation (10:1), and of his conviction that God has not rejected them (11:1-6).

It may be helpful to summarize the argument of Romans 9. Paul begins by confessing that Jewish unbelief causes him not only anguish of heart (9:1-3), but also perplexity of mind as he asks himself how the people of Israel with their eight unique privileges could have rejected their own Messiah (9:4-5). How can their apostasy be explained? Paul's questions and answers proceed consecutively.

First, *is it that God's Word has failed* (9:6a)? No, God has kept his promise, which was addressed, however, not to all Israel but to true spiritual Israel (9:6b) whom he had called according to his own "purpose of election" (9:11-12).

Second, *is God unjust to exercise his sovereign choices* (9:14)? No. To Moses he stressed his mercy (9:15), and to Pharaoh his judgment (9:17). But it is not unjust either to show mercy to the undeserving or to harden those who harden themselves (9:18). Both mercy and judgment are fully compatible with God's justice.

Third, and this is the question in today's study, *why then does God still blame us* (9:19)? Or, as the *English Standard Version* puts it, *why does God still find fault?* Paul's threefold response to this question uncovers the misunderstandings of God which it implies:

1. God has the right of a potter to shape his clay, and we have no right to challenge him (9:20-21).
2. God must reveal himself as he is, making known his wrath and his glory (9:22-23). And,
3. God has foretold in Scripture both the inclusion of the

Gentiles and the exclusion of Israel (except for a remnant) (9:24-29).

And fourth, and this is the question we will study next time, Lord willing, *what then shall we say in conclusion* (9:30)? The explanation of the church's composition (a Gentile majority and a Jewish remnant) is that the Gentiles believed in Jesus whereas the majority of Israel stumbled over him, the stone God had laid (9:30-33). Thus the acceptance of the Gentiles is attributed to the sovereign mercy of God, and the rejection of Israel to their own rebellion.

Lesson

With this summary before us, let me now continue with today's lesson. Today, we deal with the question Paul asks in 9:19a: **“Why does he [i.e., God] still find fault?”**

If salvation is due entirely to God's will (which it is, as stated twice in verse 15 and twice more in verse 18), and if we do not resist his will (which we do not, and indeed could not), **“Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”** (9:19).

In other words, is it fair of God to hold us accountable to him, when he makes the decisions? To this question Paul makes three responses, all of which concern who God is. Most of our problems arise and seem insoluble because our image of God is distorted.

I. God Has the Right of a Potter Over His Clay (9:20-21)

First, God has the right of a potter over his clay (9:20-21).

Notice how Paul responds in verses 20-21: **“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?’ 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's first response to his critic's two questions (in verse 19)

is to pose three counter-questions which all concern our identity. Paul asks:

1. whether we know who we are (9:20a),
2. what kind of relationship we think exists between us and God (9:20b),
3. and what attitude to him we consider appropriate to this relationship (9:21).

Moreover, all three counter-questions emphasize the gulf which yawns between **man** and **God** (9:20a), between **what is molded** and **its molder**, (9:20b), and between **the clay** and **the potter** who is shaping it (9:21).

Since this is the relationship between us and God, do we really think it fitting for a man **to answer back to God** (9:20a), for art to ask the artist why he has made it as he has (9:20b), or for a pot to challenge the potter's right to shape the same lump of clay into pottery for different uses (9:21)?

We need to recall the Old Testament background to Paul's questions. The village potter at his wheel was a familiar figure in Palestine, and his craft was used to illustrate several different truths.

Paul is alluding to two texts in Isaiah. Isaiah 29:16 contains God's striking complaint to Israel, "You turn things upside down!" That is, refusing to allow God to be God, they even attempt to reverse roles, as if the potter had become the pot and the pot the potter. In Isaiah 45:9 God pronounces, "Woe to him who strives with him who formed him," to him who challenges the potter to explain what he is making.

What then is Paul condemning? Some commentators betray their embarrassment at this point, and others are brash enough to reject Paul's teaching. "It is the weakest point in the whole epistle," declares C. H. Dodd.

But we need to draw a distinction. Paul is not censuring someone who asks sincerely perplexed questions, but rather someone who "strives" or "quarrels" (*NIV*) with God, who talks back (9:20). Such a person manifests a reprehensible spirit of rebellion

against God, a refusal to let God be God and acknowledge his or her true status as creature and sinner.

Instead of such presumption we need, like Moses, to keep our distance, take off our shoes in recognition of the holy ground on which we stand, and even hide our faces from him.

Similarly, we need, like Job, to put our hands over our mouths, confess that we tend to speak things we do not understand, and repent in dust and ashes. Job had been right to reject the traditional claptrap of his so-called “comforters,” and in his dialogue with them he had been right and they were wrong. Where Job went wrong was in daring to “contend” with the Almighty, to “accuse” him and attempt to “correct” him.

But still the whole story has not yet been told. For we are not merely lumps of inert clay, and this passage well illustrates the danger of arguing from an analogy. To liken humans to pottery is to emphasize the disparity between us and God.

But there is another strand in biblical teaching which affirms not our unlikeness but our likeness to God, because we have been created in his image, and because we still bear it (though distorted) even since the fall. As God’s image-bearers, we are rational, responsible, moral and spiritual beings, able to converse with God, and encouraged to explore his revelation, to ask questions and to think his thoughts after him.

In consequence, there are occasions in which biblical characters who have fallen on their faces before God are told to stand up on their feet again, especially to receive God’s commission.

In other words, there is a right kind of prostration before God, which is a humble acknowledgment of his infinite greatness, and a wrong kind which is a groveling denial of our human dignity and responsibility before him.

Returning to Romans, Paul is not wishing to stifle genuine questions. After all, he has been asking and answering questions throughout the chapter and indeed the whole letter. No, it is the God-defying rebel and not the bewildered seeker after the truth whose mouth Paul shuts.

Paul's emphasis in this text is that as the potter has the right to shape his clay into vessels for different purposes, so God has the right to deal with fallen humanity according to both his wrath and his mercy, as he has argued in verses 10-18.

II. God Reveals Himself As He Is (9:22-23)

Second, God reveals himself as he is (9:22-23).

Paul continues to demonstrate that God's freedom to show mercy to some and to harden others is fully compatible with his justice. We must allow God to be God, not only in renouncing every presumptuous desire to challenge him (9:20-21), but also in assuming that his actions are without exception in harmony with his nature. For God is always self-consistent and never self-contradictory. He determines to be himself and to be seen to be himself.

Verses 22 and 23, which are parallel to each other, plainly express this theme. The word that is common to both is the verb **"to make known."**

Verse 22 speaks of the revelation of God's **wrath. . . to vessels of wrath**, and verse 23 of the revelation of **the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy**.

Verse 22 begins with the rhetorical question, **"What if God. . . ?"** The meaning is readily intelligible, however. Paul is implying that if God acts in perfect accordance with his **wrath** and **mercy**, there can be no possible objection.

Although the structure of the two verses is similar, there are also significant differences to be noted.

First, God **has endured with much patience vessels of wrath**, instead of visiting it upon sinners immediately. The implication seems to be that his forbearance in delaying the hour of judgment will not only keep the door of opportunity open longer, but also make the ultimate outpouring of his wrath the more dreadful. This was so in the case of Pharaoh, and it is still the situation today as we wait for the Lord's return.

Second, although Paul describes the vessels of God's mercy as those **which he has prepared beforehand for glory** (9:23), he describes the vessels of God's wrath simply as **prepared for destruction**, ready and ripe for it, without indicating the agency, responsible for this preparation. Certainly God has never "prepared" anybody for destruction; is it not that by their own evildoing they prepare themselves for it?

There is a third difference between verses 22 and 23. Although they are complementary, verse 23 is dependent on verse 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, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory."** This is indeed what God did. That is, the revelation of his wrath to the vessels of his wrath was with a view to the revelation of his glory to the vessels of his mercy.

The preeminent disclosure will be of the riches of God's glory; and the glory of his grace will shine the more brightly against the somber background of his wrath. **"Glory"** is of course shorthand for the final destiny of the redeemed, in which the splendor of God will be shown to and in them, as first they are transformed and then the universe (cf. 8:18ff).

So God's two actions, summed up in verse 18 as "mercy" and "hardens," have now been traced back to his character. It is because he is who he is that he does what he does. And although this does not solve the ultimate mystery why he prepares some people in advance for glory and allows others to prepare themselves for destruction, yet both are revelations of God, of his patience and wrath in judgment and above all of his glory and mercy in salvation.

III. God Has Foretold These Things in Scripture (9:24-29)

Paul now gives a third explanation to the question "Why does God still blame us?" (9:19, *NIV*). It is that God has foretold these

things in Scripture (9:24-29).

Among the vessels of God's mercy, whom he has prepared in advance for glory (9:23), Paul now includes **even us**, himself and his readers, **whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles** (9:24). For God's way of dealing with Jews and Gentiles was another illustration of his "purpose of election" (9:11) and had been clearly foretold in Old Testament Scripture. In verses 25-26 Paul quotes two texts from Hosea, to explain God's amazing inclusion of the Gentiles, and then in verses 27-29 two texts from Isaiah, to explain his equally amazing reduction of Jewish inclusion to a remnant.

The background to the Hosea texts was Hosea's marriage to his "wife of whoredom," Gomer, together with their three children whose names symbolized God's judgment on the unfaithful northern kingdom of Israel. God told them to call their second child, a daughter, "No Mercy" because, he said, "For I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel" (Hosea 1:6). He then told them to call their third child, a boy, "Not My People" for, he added, "you are not my people, and I am not your God" (Hosea 1:9).

Yet God went on to promise that he would reverse the situation of rejection implicit in the children's names. These are the texts Paul quotes: **"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.'" (9:25-26).**

In order to understand Paul's handling of these texts, we need to remember that, according to the New Testament, Old Testament prophecies often have a threefold fulfillment. The first is immediate and literal (in the history of Israel), the second intermediate and spiritual (in Christ and his church), and the third ultimate and eternal (in God's consummated kingdom).

Here, the prophecy takes the form of God's promise in mercy to overturn an apparently hopeless situation, to love again those he had declared unloved, and to welcome again as his people those he

had said were not. The immediate and literal application was to Israel in the eighth century BC, repudiated and judged by God for apostasy, but promised a reconciliation and reinstatement.

The apostle Paul, however, is shown that God's promise has a further and gospel fulfillment in the inclusion of the Gentiles. They had been "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus," Paul continues, "you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:12f., 19). Their inclusion is a marvelous reversal of fortunes by God's mercy. The outsiders have been welcomed inside, the aliens have become citizens, and the strangers are now beloved members of the family.

Next Paul turns from Hosea to Isaiah, and so from the inclusion of the Gentiles to the exclusion of the Jews, apart from a remnant. The historical background to the two Isaiah texts is again one of national apostasy in the eighth century BC, although it now relates to the southern kingdom of Judah. The "sinful nation" has forsaken God and has been judged through an Assyrian invasion, so that the whole country lies desolate and only a few survivors are left.

God goes on to promise, however, that Assyria will be punished for its arrogance, and that a believing remnant will return to the Lord. Indeed, the name of Isaiah's son symbolized this promise, as Shear-Jashub means "a remnant will return" (Isaiah 7:3): **"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, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.' And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah'"** (9:27-29).

The significance of both texts lies in the contrast they contain between the majority and the minority. In verse 27 (quoting Isaiah

10:22) it is said that **the number of the sons of Israel** will be **as the sand of the sea**. This was God's promise to Abraham after his surrender of Isaac, although he added the second metaphor, "as the stars in the sky." But in comparison with the countless number of Israelites, like stars and grains of sand, only a remnant would be saved, the Israel within Israel (9:6). Similarly, in verse 29, out of the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah only a handful was spared, in fact only Lot and his two daughters.

By bringing the Hosea and Isaiah texts together, Paul provides Old Testament warrant for his vision. On the one hand, God has called us, he writes, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles (9:24). So there is a fundamental Jewish-Gentile solidarity in God's new society.

On the other hand, Paul is conscious of the serious imbalance between the size of the Gentile participation and the size of the Jewish participation in the redeemed community. As Hosea prophesied, multitudes of Gentiles, formerly disenfranchised, have now been welcomed as the people of God. As Isaiah prophesied, however, the Jewish membership was only a remnant of the nation, so small in fact as to constitute not the inclusion of Israel but its exclusion, not its acceptance but its "rejection" (11:15).

Conclusion

The bottom line for each of us is not to question God and his ways. The bottom line for each of us is to cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness. He alone is sovereign. He alone is able to save. He alone rules over all.

If we would be saved, we must cry out to him for mercy and forgiveness.

The amazing thing is that when we do so, he hears and forgives. Amen.

Mission Statement

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and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Taken from Ray Ortland's *A Passion for God*:

Merciful Lord, you will not allow our sins to defeat your purpose. You stretch out your hand to reverse our mad rush after idols. You turn us around and lead us in a new direction. You pour your love out upon us even though we deserve your wrath. You will make us true children of the living God. And all this mercy is the overflow of your glory, which are putting on display before the whole universe. Truly, your goodness is of a spreading nature! We open our hearts now to receive your mercy as our dearest treasure and your greatest glory.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.