

3. In the larger context Paul was addressing the problem of Israel's unbelief, and he approached the matter by considering Israel with respect to its place in salvation history. That is to say, Paul understood that the only way to properly interact with and understand Israel's state of unbelief under the gospel is to discern the role the Old Testament people of God have played, and continue to play, in God's outworking of His comprehensive redemptive purpose. Paul's thinking and approach may be summarized as follows:
- Behind everything that exists stands God's eternal purpose. That purpose is His determination to finally sum up everything in the created order in Christ, and in that way bring everything into perfect, consummate relationship to Himself (Ephesians 1:1-12; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28). The perfect ordering and interrelationship of all things according to their created design under His lordship is God's great goal; it is the definition of the kingdom of God. This reality was manifested in a germinal way in the Garden, and at each stage of history God has been setting it in front of men as the destiny toward which all things are moving.
 - Because this purpose is being accomplished in time and space in connection with humanity, it implicates the biblical principle of election. God's saving and transforming work in Christ is being realized through human instruments. Thus Israel's unbelief must be understood in terms of God's accomplishment of His sovereign purpose, as also must the faith of the saints. *The Church's unassailable confidence and hope, so magnificently presented in chapter eight, have the same frame of reference as Israel's national unbelief and accursed state.* Both are interrelated expressions of the glorious truth of a God who cannot and will not fail to fulfill and bring to consummation His saving purpose for His creation in Christ.

It is within this unified, all-encompassing perspective that Paul introduced the examples of Abraham's sons and grandsons, insisting that in them God was demonstrating the overarching truth that His promise according to His purpose will stand; His children are determined solely by promise, not human considerations of any kind (9:6-13). Likewise, the fulfillment of the promise not only does not *depend* upon men, it overcomes the *opposition* of men. Pharaoh embodied the principle of opposition to God – an opposition that bound and enslaved the heirs of the promise and brought the fulfillment of the promise into jeopardy. Pharaoh stood between God and the realization of the promise, but far from prevailing against the promise, the principle of opposition in Pharaoh became the occasion and instrument for the fulfillment of the promise (9:14-18). God accomplishes His saving purpose as promised, and He does so, not in spite of opposition, but by *means* of opposition. This principle is reiterated over and over again in the Scripture, and finds its pinnacle expression in the atoning death of the Lord Jesus.

This is the framework within which the larger context of chapters 9-11 must be kept. Paul's goal was not to proof-text the doctrines of election and reprobation; he interacted with these matters because of their importance to the issue at hand, namely how Israel's unbelief is to be understood in the light of God's promises to them and His purposes in salvation history. Paul intended for these doctrines to be considered and understood within a broader gospel framework, even as they intensify the glory of chapter eight.

The gospel framework of Paul's argumentation becomes even more evident in the next question/answer episode in his diatribe (9:19-29). This passage is comprised of a second rhetorical objection (v. 19) followed by Paul's extended response. The objection parallels its predecessor, wherein Paul raised the issue of the justice of God in view of the principle of sovereign choice (v. 14). In the present passage the objection is directed toward a different issue of divine fairness, namely the propriety of God finding fault with men when they are bound over to His will. Interestingly, the substance of his response is a series of his own questions redirected toward his imagined objector (vv. 20-24), whose thrust is then substantiated by two citations drawn from the Old Testament prophets Hosea (vv. 25-26) and Isaiah (vv. 27-29).

- a. Paul closed the preceding section by declaring that God retains the sovereign prerogative to show mercy to whom He desires, and so correspondingly to harden (withhold mercy from) whom He desires. Israel supplied the example of the former, and Pharaoh the latter. God's hardening of Pharaoh brought about his final destruction; by His own proclamation, God had set him on the throne of Egypt and held him in his stubborn opposition for the purpose of demonstrating His power in him (9:17-18; ref. also Exodus 9:13-16).

It is important to recognize that the core issue in God's demonstration of power was not Pharaoh's destruction, *but His conquest of the opposing power that had held His people in hopeless subjugation*. Pharaoh's role in God's purpose was to show Israel and the world that Yahweh is a God who is committed and able to fulfill His covenant promise, whatever power or circumstance brings the promise into jeopardy. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Pharaoh was bound over to the fulfillment of God's will, even as was the nation of Israel. Israel's unbelief and disobedience could not abrogate the promise any more than could Pharaoh's opposition. God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy; His mercy in keeping His promise "does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs" (9:15-16; cf. Exodus 32:11-14; also Ezekiel 20:1-44; Hosea 11:1-12; etc.).

But if it is true that God's will prevails in the lives of men – if it is true that Pharaoh was bound over to the accomplishment of God's purpose – then how could God justly destroy him for simply doing what He had determined he should do? God had *hardened* Pharaoh; how, then, could God find fault with him, for "who resists His will" (9:19)?

Although the objection is clearly directed toward God's interaction with Pharaoh ("why does He still find *fault*"), it is vital to recognize that the issue it raises comprehends all things. Israel could no more thwart God's will in sovereign mercy than could Pharaoh in sovereign hardening. Israel was as subject to God's will as was Pharaoh. Each served in its own way toward the accomplishment of the divine purpose to fulfill the promise to Abraham. *The former was the recipient of the blessing of the promise; the latter was the instrument for its reception*. This dual principle of sovereign choice cannot be overstated and must not be missed, for it stands at the very heart of Paul's argument in these three chapters.

- b. As noted, Paul's response to this objection consists of a series of redirected questions, the first of which is the basis for the others that follow: "*Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?*" The verb rendered "answer back" is a compound form in Greek that signifies a contradicting response or disputation. Here the disputation is directed toward God's exercise of His sovereign choice, and Paul's point is that, no person can justly contradict or sit in judgment of God. The simple reason is that man is not God. Man is a created being and God is his Creator, and Paul punctuated the distinction by employing the emphatic pronoun *you* directly modified by the noun *man*, and then contrasting them with the noun *God*: **You** are a **man**; how will you quarrel with **God**? Further, Paul employed Isaiah 29:16 (perhaps also 45:9 and 64:8) to poignantly illustrate this distinction: "*The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?*" (9:20-21)

In drawing the Creator/creature distinction Paul specifically emphasized God's sovereign *prerogative*. Keeping with Paul's illustration, the one who makes something has full authority over the object of his making. He can decide to form and use that object however he pleases. For its part, the thing made has no basis to object to its identity or function, *for its very existence depends upon and derives from the intention and purpose of its maker*.

Paul's emphasis was upon divine prerogative, but the Creator/creature distinction also points to a second consideration. Men do not merely lack the right to question their Creator; they lack the *capacity* to do so. Man is not God, and so is unable to discern the intricacies of the divine purpose and how a given person fits into His overall plan that embraces the whole of the created order. For this reason it is absurd for a person to sit in judgment of God's activities. His purposes and ways transcend human understanding, making it the height of folly for anyone to presume that he possesses the capacity to pass judgment on what God does.

The potter and clay imagery is present three times in Isaiah's prophecy and once in Jeremiah, and the various contexts are helpful in framing Paul's use of it here:

- 1) In the first occurrence (Isaiah 29:16), God was indicting Israel for her foolish conviction that her rebellious and idolatrous ways and actions were unseen and untouchable by God. The idea here in the potter/clay analogy is that the clay deludes itself if it thinks it can operate autonomously from the potter and deny its source in him. Even more, the clay's confident conviction that the potter has no knowledge of its secret motives and actions is spectacularly foolish. *For how can a created thing assert its own knowledge as the basis for denying the same knowledge in its creator?* How is it that the thing formed can have the insight and discernment to say to Him who formed it, "*He has no understanding*"? Can a potter possibly impart to his creation a knowledge that he himself lacks?

- 2) The second context (Isaiah 45:9) has a different orientation and emphasis. The historical setting is the impending Babylonian captivity, and the potter's prerogative is tied to God's determination to use the Medo-Persian king Cyrus as His deliverer/messiah when He restores the remnant of Judah. He will use a man who does not know Him to accomplish His redemptive purpose for His people. In context, the issue of *quarreling* seems to be Israel's resentment and incredulity toward a God who would punish His covenant people with a nation worse than them (cf. Habakkuk 1:1-17), and then appoint a pagan king to be His messiah and savior when the time of their chastening was completed (ref. 45:1-13).
- 3) The third Isaiah context has a tone of humility and repentance centered in Israel's legacy as an unfaithful son of a devoted Father (64:8). Israel has sinned grievously and broken Yahweh's covenant, so that the nation's captivity is justly deserved. But in their misery the people cry out to God to remember that He is their Redeemer and Father in accordance with His promise to Abraham, and thereby bestow His restoring mercy on them. Israel is the clay and Yahweh is the potter; they are the work of His hands, *and He formed them to be His peculiar people*. For that reason, Israel's plea is that He would not be angry with them forever, but rather remember why He "molded" them, not turn aside from His purpose as Israel's maker, and so restore His covenant "son" to Himself (ref. 63:15-64:12).
- 4) The final Old Testament potter/clay passage is found in Jeremiah, and is set in the context of a physical sign to Judah. God instructed Jeremiah to go to the potter's house, where He would reveal His sign to him. As Jeremiah watched the potter refashion a vessel that he had spoiled on the wheel, God showed him that this incident expressed His own prerogative with men (18:1-6). Like the potter, He could take the same clay and determine to do with it something different than He had previously purposed. Specifically, this prerogative is associated with Yahweh's right to turn His wrath to favor, and His favor to wrath, depending upon the conduct of those with whom He is dealing (18:7-12).

God's purpose for His sign was to announce to Judah His determination to "fashion calamity" against them for their evil, and at the same time to call them to turn back to Him. The implication of this call was that, in His sovereign prerogative as the potter, He had the right to relent in the face of their repentance. But Judah's heart was hard; the nation declared, "*It is hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.*" Yahweh's people had utterly forsaken Him, and even His threats and overtures of sovereign mercy were unable to move them to return. Therefore, when the day of their calamity finally arrived, they would know that their own stubbornness, and not God's injustice or lack of concern, had brought their destruction. The "potter" was able to save, but the "clay" was unwilling.

Whether any or all of these contexts were specifically in Paul's mind cannot finally be established. But as a man who was steeped in the Scriptures, Paul was no doubt well familiar with the various themes surrounding the potter/clay imagery, and all of those themes are relevant to his thrust in this Romans passage. For together they reveal that God is a *sovereign Savior*:

- He retains the prerogative to accomplish His saving purpose through whatever means He chooses, and men have no right to question what He is doing or why He does it.
 - Moreover, He has the right to relent and refrain from justly destroying the rebellious where His demand of repentance is met. When men return to Him, He is free to restore them and gather them to Himself.
 - Equally importantly, God's prerogative as sovereign Savior affords to His people the confidence to plead His faithfulness to His eternal purpose. He has fashioned them according to His sovereign design, and nothing can thwart His accomplishment of His purpose for them. The potter has the right to fashion the clay as He chooses, and having done so, those vessels stand in the confidence of His purpose and power.
- c. Verses 20-21 introduce the potter/clay imagery, and the next two verses reveal Paul's reason for drawing upon it. At this point it is crucial that the larger context be kept in mind. The overarching question Paul was addressing is the way in which Israel's unbelief under the gospel is to be understood. Having established that divine *promise* determines who constitutes Israel, Paul showed that God sovereignly determines the recipients of the promise. And because receipt of the promise is a matter of *mercy* toward the undeserving, no indictment of divine justice can be brought against God's sovereign choice. From there Paul introduced the Exodus episode, both to substantiate his claims and to demonstrate the principle that, in God's scheme of redemption, sovereign mercy is bestowed through the instrument of sovereign hardening. Israel's deliverance was a matter of undeserved mercy, and God accomplished it by His hardening of Pharaoh.

The relation between mercy and hardening in the Exodus is crucial to Paul's developing argument as he seeks to answer the question of Israel's unbelief. It is especially important to keep it in mind in these two verses, as Israel and Pharaoh provide the backdrop for the ideas of "vessels of wrath" and "vessels of mercy." Pharaoh had been the vessel of wrath whom God endured with great patience in order to "*demonstrate His wrath and make His power known*" (9:22). And God did so in order that, through Pharaoh, "*He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy,*" namely the covenant nation of Israel (9:23). The potter's forming of noble and ignoble vessels was not arbitrary, but accomplished in sovereign wisdom according to predetermined purpose. The fulfillment of the divine promise for the vessels of mercy was to be realized through the desolation of the vessels of wrath – the vessels that stood opposed to the promise.

While the Exodus entities of Israel and Pharaoh introduce the concepts of “vessels of wrath” and “vessels of mercy,” Paul was moving beyond them in these two verses. As God’s Old Covenant people, Israel was the vessel of God’s mercy in the Exodus, but now the definition of God’s people has changed. The gospel has ushered in a new reality in which the nation of Israel has become the *opposer* of Yahweh and His promise, and therefore the vessel of *wrath*. It is the remnant “Israel” within Israel who remains God’s vessel of mercy. Moreover, the following context will show that, along with an Israelite remnant, the Gentiles are now included within God’s people, and so are also vessels of mercy.

But just as with the Exodus episode, the realization of the promise in the vessels of mercy has come about through the hardening of the vessels of wrath. Beginning with Christ’s death at Calvary and extending to the worldwide propagation of the gospel, the vessel of wrath that is unbelieving Israel has served as God’s instrument in His fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. Paul understood this all too well from his own experience, and from this point forward he will develop the theological significance of this historical phenomenon.

Furthermore, the fact that “vessel of wrath” has its contextual referents first in Pharaoh, and then in unbelieving Israel, provides important content for understanding Paul’s statement that such vessels were “prepared for destruction.” The historical account of God’s hardening of Pharaoh has already been addressed, and it was seen that God exercised His sovereignty in the context of Pharaoh’s willful unbelief and rejection of divine revelation and commandment. God hardened Pharaoh by simply refusing to overcome His resolute obstinacy. So also Paul will later show that Israel’s preparation for destruction as a vessel of wrath was set in the context of an ongoing refusal of God’s revelation of His gospel and His overtures of mercy (ref. 9:30-10:21).

In similar fashion, the “vessels of mercy” have been “prepared beforehand for glory,” and yet their receipt of sovereign mercy does not overthrow the operation of their own will. As *unbelief* is fundamental to one’s status as a vessel of wrath, so *faith* is fundamental to being a vessel of mercy. This, too, will become more evident later in Paul’s argument (ref. again 9:30-10:21, also 11:11-24). And so, while it is true that Paul will not allow any human contribution to be a part of God’s sovereign choice (9:6-18), he also refuses to minimize the importance of faith and unbelief in the matter of salvation. Toward that end, Douglas Moo makes the following important observation in his Romans commentary:

“I can only reiterate that the introduction into this text of any basis for God’s election outside God Himself defies both the language and the logic of what Paul has written. The only logical possibility, then, would seem to be to reverse the relationship between God’s choosing and faith; as Augustine stated it: ‘God does not choose us because we believe, but that we may believe.’ This way of putting the matter seems generally to be justified by this passage and by the teaching of Scripture elsewhere.”

Having affirmed God's absolute sovereignty, Moo continues on:

“But it comes perilously close to trivializing human faith: something that many texts in Romans and in the rest of the NT simply will not allow us to do. We need, perhaps, to be more cautious in our formulations and to insist on the absolute cruciality and meaningfulness of the human decision to believe at the same time as we rightly make God's choosing of us ultimately basic. Such a double emphasis may strain the boundaries of logic (it does not, I trust, break them!) or remain unsatisfyingly complex, but it may have the virtue of reflecting Scripture's own balanced perspective.”

Whether considering vessels of wrath or vessels of mercy, God's respective preparation of each and their final disposition must take into account the breadth of biblical revelation – including the larger context of chapters 9-11. Neglecting to do so will result in the failure to do justice to Paul's words and doctrine.

It should by now be evident that this passage is subject to two main interpretive errors:

- 1) The first is the tendency to view Paul's argument outside of its broader, salvation-historical context. All too often these verses become simply an isolated proof-text for the Reformed doctrines of election and reprobation. The result is that God is commonly viewed as a disinterested deity who, in eternity past, arbitrarily determined to make from mankind individual “vessels of mercy” and “vessels of wrath.” His only consideration in His determination was the humanly elusive commodity that is His own glory. By lifting this passage out of its context, election and reprobation readily become merely two manifestations of a sterile, isolated, and ultimately fatalistic sovereignty. Such a view of the passage falls far short of Paul's understanding and intention, and robs it of its true glory.
- 2) The second error takes into account the salvation-historical framework of Paul's argument, but stops short of his conclusions. Many rightly recognize that Paul's statements must be understood in terms of Israel's national unbelief and how it has served God's purpose in fulfilling His promise to Abraham that, in him, all the families of the earth would be blessed. By its opposition, Israel has been God's instrument for accomplishing His redemption and bringing His salvation in Christ to all the nations, which is the true realization of the Abrahamic promise. But some stop short of seeing the implications of Paul's argument for the individual. They contend that Paul was merely affirming God's sovereignty in determining His *purpose* for the “clay,” not the *identity* and *outcome* of each individual vessel. In this way the context is stripped of its salvific implications.

Paul's perspective was clearly salvation-historical, but God's exercise of His sovereignty in history has its goal in the fulfillment of His promise, namely the taking of a people to Himself through their personal, saving union with Christ. Thus it is impossible to uphold God's sovereignty in history and deny His sovereignty in men's salvation.