



**Romans 9:17-24**  
**The Potter and the Clay**

**17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."**

**18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.**

**19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"**

**20 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?"**

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

**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,**

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

**24 even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?**

[There is a tendency to think that all that Reformed preachers do is preach on this section of Romans 9. I've preached twice on it in Ten Years, and I don't think once every 5 years is excessive. Look at it this way - we elect presidents more often than I preach on Romans 9!]

Few doctrines in the bible are mentioned as often as that of God's Sovereignty – and kids if you are wondering what the sovereignty of God is, it means that he has absolute power and control over everything, there is no place or time where He doesn't rule, or isn't in control. Everything happens because he causes it to happen, and he will make everything that happens work for the good of His people and ultimately for His own glory.

In fact the doctrine of God's sovereignty is so important that one theologian described this doctrine as the "Mt. Everest of Theology" – In our theology this is like the first button on your shirt, get it wrong, and all the rest will be off as well. So your theology had better include a Sovereign God, because the only God who really is, is the God who Reigns.

While that is the God who is, it is not necessarily the God whom we want. Our fallen nature is not to accept a God who is totally sovereign in all things, especially salvation and damnation. And so our tendency is to change the God who chooses some for salvation and passes over others into a God who does neither. As Luther explained "*Mere human reason, can never comprehend how God is good and merciful; and therefore you make to yourself a God of your own imagination, who hardens nobody, condemns nobody, pities everybody.*" – Luther

But that idea of God cannot withstand the testimony of scripture, and certainly Paul demolishes it here, you can search all you want, but you won't find any asterisks after Paul's statements here. Just as he explained earlier how God was sovereign in deciding who gets elected to salvation, now he is going show that he also sovereign in deciding who is passed over by God and damned.

He starts off with the story of Pharaoh from Exodus, and points out that God himself said that the reason that Pharaoh was created and put in the position he was by God was to manifest God's glory throughout all the earth. Moses was created by God to be the deliverer of Israel, and Pharaoh was created to remain in his fallen state and thus be the cause of God's justice being visited on Egypt. Again and again God is spoken of as hardening Pharaoh's heart, and as a result he doesn't let the Moses and the people of Israel go until all of the plagues are delivered on Egypt. Now in hardening Pharaoh's heart, God didn't add anything that wasn't there already. He didn't have to work evil into it. Pharaoh in the fallen state he was born in already had a dark and stony heart, all God had to do was REMOVE his restraining hand, and Pharaoh's heart got harder still. It's in salvation that God has to add something that wasn't there before, as he says in Ezek 36:26: *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*"

Paul says specifically that the example of Pharaoh is one of many biblical proofs that God has mercy on Whom He will and Whom He wills He hardens. He elects some, He passes over others.

Paul though immediately recognizes that not everyone is going to read that and say, "**well ok, thanks for explaining that Paul.**" Some are going to react angrily, perhaps very angrily, and say "**that's not fair!**" No one can resist God's decree, so if he's decreed that these things should happen, how can man be responsible for his evil actions. They'll say, you decreed Pharaoh would do these things, and then you punished Him for it.

Now it is at this point, if I were Paul that I would immediately begin philosophizing. I would talk about the difference between God's secret and revealed will, sometimes known as his decretive and prescriptive will. I'd talk about how for instance, God had decreed that Joseph would be sold into slavery, but that it was still evil for his brothers to sell him and that God said this kind of thing shouldn't be done, how it was God's purpose for Jesus to be crucified, but that He had told his people to hear and receive His Son Jesus, and that they were responsible for the evil they did, or God's command to Pharaoh wasn't "Keep my People in bondage", it was "let my people go."

But happily I am not Paul. Paul replies with the sovereignty of God. He talks about how God is the Creator and we are his creatures, and he goes back and uses the analogy of the potter and the clay. Now we all know what a potter does, he determines I'm going to make a certain object, I'm going to make vase, or a pot, or a mug, or a chamber pot, or if he's kid at camp an ashtray. Then he goes and he gets clay and he puts it on the potters wheel. He doesn't put the clay on the wheel and leave it to its own devices, hoping that the clay will somehow fashion itself or come out right by chance. Instead he fashions it, he makes it the way he wants it. And when its done it would be absurd for the thing he made to complain about what it was made into.

Paul doesn't come up with this image out of thin air, it was used several times in the Old Testament:

*Is. 64:8 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.*

*Jer. 18:3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel.*

***4 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.***

***Is. 45:9 " Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' Or shall your handiwork say, 'He has no hands'?"***

It's also important to note this phrase "from the same lump" helps to explain why what God does is just. Because you see that Lump, that clay, that God is working with is fallen and hell bound humanity.

As B.B. Warfield reminds us: ***"But, on the other hand, it is ever taught that, as the body out of which believers are chosen by God's unsearchable grace is the mass of justly condemned sinners, so the destruction to which those that are passed by are left is the righteous recompense of their guilt.***

***Thus the discrimination between men in the matter of eternal destiny is distinctly set forth as taking place in the interests of mercy and for the sake of salvation: from the fate which justly hangs over all, God is represented as in His infinite compassion rescuing those chosen to this end in His inscrutable counsels of mercy to the praise of the glory of His grace; while those that are left in their sins perish most deservedly, as the justice of God demands"***

It's not amazing that some men go to hell, that's just justice. It's amazing that anyone goes to heaven, that's unmerited mercy. He goes on to point out that in verses 22-23, that without those vessels prepared for destruction, the common vessels who receive justice you'd never appreciate just how glorious the other vessels are. If all we had was fine china in the house, you'd never realize it's true value.

The reason we have those expensive cabinets and pass it down, is because we appreciate how special, and beautiful, and rare, and expensive that fine china is. And here I need to make this point, the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, cost nothing, the vessels of glory are more expensive than you could imagine, because the cost of their creation was the life of God's only Begotten Son Jesus Christ.

Now both the common and the expensive vessel glorify their master and have a use. They are both necessary. You wouldn't use the 19<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Russian Soup Tureen as a chamber pot, and you wouldn't serve soup to your honored guests out of a chamber pot. But it is the vessels of honor that glorify God directly and are the ones whom Christ came to save.

God's sovereignty then is the answer to this puzzle, just as it was the answer that God gave to Job's questions about his suffering. Robert Haldane reflects on this in way that I think we should all take to heart:

***"Let the Lord's people be satisfied with the Apostle's answer, and let it be sufficient for them to know that God has willed both the salvation of the elect, and the destruction of the wicked, although they are not able to fathom the depths of the ways of God. The Apostle tells us the fact, and shows us that it must be received on God's testimony, and not on our ability to justify it. That God does all things right there is no question, but the grounds of His conduct He does not now explain to His people. Much less is it to be supposed that He would justify His conduct by explaining the grounds of it to His enemies. No man has a right to bring God to trial. What He tells us of Himself, or of ourselves, let us receive as unquestionably right." – Robert Haldane***

**Applications:**

1) Should we keep this truth of God's Sovereignty in all things to ourselves? No! **Psalm 96:10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns; The world also is firmly established, It shall not be moved; He shall judge the peoples righteously."**

And this is Good News!

*Psalm 97:1 The LORD reigns; Let the earth rejoice; Let the multitude of isles be glad!*

*Matt. 10:29 "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will.*

*30 "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*

*31 "Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

God will take care of things. All things will work for our good, even the evil of the Reprobate, and we need that assurance these days. Even those who are hardened against God, who will not be saved, they will glorify God, be assured of that.

**2) Please remember the Creator Creature distinction.** He made you, you are the clay HE is the Potter. He is molding YOU for his purposes according to His design. Our tendency is to want to remold God in our own image, or assume something about us our lives our someone else is a mistake. God it was supposed to go this way. We want God in orbit around us, doing as we say according to our rules. But that is a God of our own imagination. Not the God of the Bible.

*It may be that today you were reminded of that today in your own lives for a purpose. Even this is the potter's hand molding you for his purposes.*

In the book of Job we read about a righteous man who is deeply afflicted, in the space of one day, he loses every worldly possession he has and most of his family, with the exception of his wife and she is no comfort to him, and yet at no point does Job lose sight of the sovereignty of God in everything that has happened to Him, both good and bad, after all he doesn't say, "The LORD gave, and the devil has taken away" he says "**The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.**" And yet he grumbles. At points it would be better if he died, or had never been born, he seems to be accuses God at times of making a mistake. Then God answers Him with HIS SOVEREIGNTY and Job says put my hand over my mouth!

*NOTHING in your life is a mistake. God is working his purposes out:*

### **3) This is good news for the evangelist**

God ordains the means as well as the ends – prayer and the sharing of the gospel

The Christian Farmer knows that the increase will not come unless he plants, but he also knows God will give the increase and give him the harvest. Go sow and reap!

You do not know who is reprobate and who is elect, that is for God to know.

In the Arminian system, many for whom Christ died, will not be saved. Through mistakes and oversights, many of the sheaves will be left uncut. In this system none will be forgotten all we be brought in to the Lord's storehouse.