

ROMANS 9:19-23

Once again, it is important to keep our "Israel Glasses" on. The entire context of this chapter is God's dealing with His choice of a nation (Israel) to be the instrument of His plan for the world in, ultimately, bringing salvation to the world. The content previously, and in these verses, have absolutely nothing to do with individual election to heaven or hell. Remember the excellent admonition Austin Fischer made:

"All that Paul has said up until this point...has *begged the question of Israel*. Why has Israel, by and large, rejected its Messiah? What is God doing with Israel? Has he forsaken his first chosen people (Israel) for a new chosen people (Gentiles)? If so, hasn't God been unfaithful to his promises to Israel?"

As Romans 9:1-6 makes clear, these questions are the glasses through which we must read chapters 9-11 and if you take them off for a second, everything is going to get fuzzy."

Austin Fischer, Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed, selections from pg. 100

The purpose of Romans 9-11 is to show God's faithfulness to His promises to Israel and specifically that Israel would be used to bring Messiah into the world and through Him, both Jews and Gentiles would find the mercy of God in Jesus.

It is also important to understand that God's mercy and hardening is based on *belief* or *unbelief*, not "unilateral, eternal decisions to save or damn individuals," (Fischer also mentions 9:32, 11:20-21, 11:25 as additional passages that show it is based on *belief* and *unbelief* in this section of Romans).

If someone reads this section, or the previous verses 6-18, with a preconceived idea that this is dealing with God sovereignly choosing individuals eternal destiny to either heaven or hell (i.e Calvinism), then that person will find support for his preconceived belief. BUT, if one follow the context of this chapter, it is dealing with God's sovereign choice of the NATION of Israel, verses 1-5, the reader will come away with a different understanding.

Both positions accept God's sovereign choice. But one sees it as choosing who will be saved or won't be saved. The other sees it as choosing of a nation to fulfill the purpose of God in redemption through Jesus. The difference is unbridgeable.

19 Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?

Two questions are posed by people based on the previous section stating that God sovereignly decides the nation (people group) He will use for His purposes. It is paramount that we remember that the context of this passage, and the use of Moses and Pharaoh in the previous section, is that of God's sovereign choice of NATIONS He uses to work out His plan.

Man will ask "Why does God find fault?"

Man will ask "Who has resisted God's will?"

The questions are not directly answered. Consider verse 20.

20 Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?

God replies by asking (stating):

First: What right does any of mankind have to question God?

Second: What right does the creation have to ask anything of the creator and why God did something?

The key here is to understand that this is not a question about an individuals eternal destiny, but the use of one nation (Israel, represented by Moses) for His purpose in contrast to another nation (Egypt, represented by Pharaoh). Individual destiny is not in sight here, but the destiny of nations to bring about God's purposes.

21 Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?

The question is asked, using a common illustration found in the Bible, of the potter and the clay. In every instance where this illustration is used it speaks of a group, usually the nation of Israel. If this verse is speaking about individuals it is contrary to every other use of the potter and a vessel as an illustration in the entire Bible.

"Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay: for shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not? or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?," Isaiah 29:16.

"But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand," Isaiah 64:8.

"Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel," Jeremiah 18:3-6.

Jeremiah 19:1-11, Jeremiah is told to get a potter's vessel and in verse 11 it is told to break it. The entire context is the potter's vessel represents the NATION of Israel.

"The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!," Lamentations 4:2.

Revelation 2:27 uses the illustration: "And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father." The vessels broken are a group, not an individual.

The "potter" (God) has power over the clay to use one nation for honor and another nation for dishonor!

The question can be asked, "How can God call Israel a 'vessel unto honor' in light of their sinful history?" Before this is answered (in the following verses), the same could certainly be asked if this is speaking of "individual election to heaven or hell." In what way can believers be called vessels of honor?

The Believer's Study Bible, as many do, wants to see individual election in this verse, unfortunately, but it gets this illustration right when it refers it to the nation of Israel (although the wording is faulty - it is not "the principal application of the passage"; it is "the correct interpretation of this passage."). As with many, a preconceived bias sees "Calvinism" here, but when the text, alone, is adhered to, the subject is clearly the nation of Israel.

"Although the illustration of the right of the potter to do with the vessel as he wishes, whether to honor or dishonor it, may certainly be applied to individual election, nevertheless, **the election of the nation of Israel is the primary subject under discussion in ch 9-11, and the principal application of the passage is to Israel.**" (Bold added)

Tony Garland in his commentary makes the same erroneous presumption that Believer's Study Bible does, as well as many others.

"'the potter...the clay?' The larger context of this passage is reinforced by the Old Testament context regarding the potter and the clay. These typically refer to God and Israel (Isa. 29:1; 45:11; 64:8,11; Lam. 4:2; Jer. 18:1-6). **Remember that Paul is still speaking about Israel and her failure to accept Messiah**, although the principles of sovereign election apply to all men (Rom.9:24)."

22 What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:

Two questions are asked:

What if God wants to show His wrath? What if God wanted to make His power known?

First, note that God **"endured with much longsuffering."**

Ask yourself a question. If God had sovereignly designed (elected) something and it was doing exactly what He had designed it for, "Why would He **endure with much long suffering.**"

When something works exactly as planned one doesn't suffer through it and endure it. They rejoice that it is doing exactly as designed.

Go back to the previous section, verses 14-18, when Pharaoh kept on hardening his heart until God confirmed him in his rebellion. God gave Pharaoh many opportunities, and signs of His power, to turn to him. Pharaoh didn't heed but could have, at least initially. God endured Pharaoh's initial rejections, being longsuffering - patient, because "God is not willing that any perish."

The reason **"God endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath,"** those who resist His will, is not that He has predestined them to hell, but the only place for people who reject Jesus is hell. And, God desires that no one go to hell.

They are **"fitted to destruction"** - notice it doesn't say who was the source of their **"fitted to destruction"**

"Fitted unto destruction. Fitted for it by their own unwillingness to be molded into vessels of honor. Scholars have noticed the significant absence of 'He' from before 'fitted.'" Teacher's Commentary

'The perfect tense emphasizes the state or condition that was the result of their rejection of God's internal and external revelation of His nature. They rejected God at some point in time and they were still in that state. They were ripe (fitted) for destruction because of their own actions of rejecting the truth.'

Adam Clarke Commentary on verse 22:

"What if God, willing to show his wrath: The apostle refers here to the case of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and to which he applies Jeremiah's parable of the potter, and, from them, to the then state of the Jews. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were vessels of wrath-persons deeply guilty before God; and by their obstinate refusal of his grace, and abuse of his goodness, they had fitted themselves for that destruction which the wrath, the vindictive justice of God, inflicted, after he had endured their obstinate rebellion with much long-suffering; which is a most absolute proof that the hardening of their hearts, and their ultimate punishment, were the consequences of their obstinate refusal of his grace and abuse of his goodness; as the history in Exodus sufficiently shows. As the Jews of the apostle's time had sinned after the similitude of the Egyptians, hardening their hearts and abusing his goodness, after every display of his long-suffering kindness, being now fitted for destruction, they were ripe for punishment; and that power, which God was making known for their salvation, having been so long and so much abused and provoked, was now about to show itself in their destruction as a nation. But even in this case there is not a word of their final damnation; much less that either they or any others were, by a sovereign decree, reprobated from all eternity; and that their very sins, the proximate cause of their punishment, were the necessary effect of that decree which had from all eternity doomed them to endless torments. As such a doctrine could never come from God, so it never can be found in the words of his apostle."

23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,

Here we have the contrast with "vessels of wrath" in vs. 22 and "vessels of mercy" in vs. 23.

The purpose of God is to **make known the riches of his glory.** The purpose here speaks of His plan of redemption, through Israel, in the person of the Messiah.

"I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry: and I will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory," Isaiah 46:13.

The context and the flow of Romans 9 will keep us consistent and focused on what is being taught.

Romans 9:1-5	Sets out the privileges of the nation of Israel.
Romans 9:6-13	The patriarchs of the nation of Israel - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
Romans 9:14-18	Deals with the exodus of Egypt and Israel (represented by Moses) and Egypt (represented by Pharaoh).
Romans 9:19-23	Man has no right to question God's choice of the nation of Israel as the vehicle to bring salvation through Jesus.

"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

Here's what Paul is saying. God wanted to establish a family, a lineage, a channel through whom He would bring into the world a great Redeemer, the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In His sovereignty He chose one man—Abraham. That man had two sons: Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael was rejected, and Isaac was chosen as the son through whom the seed would come. Isaac had two sons—Jacob and Esau. Esau was rejected, and Jacob was chosen as the son through whom the seed would come.

God, in His sovereignty, established a family tree for the Messiah. The next several verses say, in effect, "Was God unfair in doing this? No. He is God, and He can do whatever He wants." So He chose a certain nation and a certain family, and through them came the Messiah."

Robert Morgan, *What's Ahead for Israel - Romans 9-11*, teaching pastor at Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, TN

"Why is it that Israel lives today and all of those other ancient nations have perished? It is a work, it is an election, it is a sovereignty of Almighty God. Like the Gulf Stream goes through the sea, so the great race of Israel continues through the eons and the centuries and the millennium. Explain that! You couldn't explain it; it is a part of the sovereign grace and choice and election of Almighty God.

The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 24:34-35 this generation—this race, this genus, this tribe, these Jews, the children of Abraham—they shall not pass away until all of the promises and the denouement of God be unraveled and unfolded and fulfilled according to the sacred Word." The Jew will be here to the end of time, and he will share in the consummation of the ages. He is beloved of Abraham, for Abraham's sake, and he is the chosen of God, and he will always be in this earth [Romans 11:28].

That's a part of the elective purpose of Almighty God, and all I can do is look at it. Hitler can try to destroy them. Stalin might. Through the years they have been persecuted, they have been the vagabonds in the earth, but they are still here, and God says they will be here until the end of time [Matthew 24:34-35]. That is an election of Almighty God [Romans 11:28-29].

I say, I do not deign to explain the work of the Almighty. All I can do is look at it. And that's all Paul could do. All Paul could do was just to look and marvel at the riches of the grace of God, the elective purposes of God.

The ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of the Book of Romans are all about that: God's purposes, His elective purposes with Israel and with the peoples of the earth [Romans 9:1-11:36]. And look how he closes it. Does he explain anything about it? He cannot! Paul, though he is inspired, cannot reach into the unfathomable, inexplicable depths of the wisdom of Almighty God. Look how he closes the passage—9, 10, and 11—look how he closes. Look how he ends the eleventh chapter of the Book of Romans [Romans 11:33-36] :

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counselor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed to him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be the glory for ever and for ever. Amen."

W.A. Criswell, *Election: The Hardest Passage in the Bible*, Romans 9:10-28

the vessels of mercy are those who respond to the grace of God.

which he had afore prepared unto glory speaks of the same truth that was mentioned back in Romans 8:29-30 (see also Ephesians 1:1-5), that all believers, before the foundation of the world, are predestined to be in glory (heaven). In the same way God "predestined" that Israel would be His redemptive nation bringing the Savior into the world.