

3) God's word and justice with regard to Gentiles have not failed—9:22–33

9:22 What if God, although wishing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

9:23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,

9:24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

Verses 22–24 explain (apply) verse 21: “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?” The answer, of course, is that the potter does have the right over the clay. He can make vessels for honorable use (“vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory”) and vessels for dishonorable use (“vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”). Isaac and Jacob are examples of vessels of mercy; Pharaoh is an example of a vessel of wrath.

Verse 22 is an incomplete conditional sentence; it starts, “What if God . . .” but there is no apodosis. The point however is clear; if God acts in accordance with His nature, demonstrating His wrath and mercy, no one can object (Stott, 272) for God has the right to be God.

Elsewhere in the writings of Paul, God's patience toward sinners is described in a positive light. In Romans 2:4 he asked, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” In 1 Timothy 1:16 Paul saw his own salvation as a display of God's patience. He said, “Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.” 2 Peter 3:9 states, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” Thus God's patience toward sinners accomplishes two ends: (1) it allows time for people to repent and experience God's mercy, and for God to demonstrate the riches of His grace, and (2) it gives opportunities throughout history for God to demonstrate His wrath and express His abhorrence of sin (see Ro. 1:18). An example of the latter has already been given in this context; God's wrath was expressed against Pharaoh and it resulted in God's name being proclaimed throughout the earth (9:17). Furthermore, Paul has in mind God's endurance toward Israel's unbelief (the fate of Israel is at the center of Romans 9–11). Because God is patient toward sinners, God has opportunity to express wrath and mercy.

To state it differently, although God *desires* to carry out justice upon sinners (cf. Ro. 2:5), He *endures* them with patience instead (9:22) showing them kindness and pleading with them to repent and receive His gift of salvation. The elect repent and display God's grace; the unrepentant refuse to come and therefore remain under His wrath.

Verse 22 says that the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction but Paul does not tell us who prepared them. Some have concluded that people prepared themselves (Stott, 272); however, God seems to clearly be the subject in the entire context.

1) In verses 17–18 God is the actor.

2) In verse 21 God is the Potter who creates two types of vessels—one for common use (the unbeliever) and one for honorable use (the believer). Verse 22 doesn't have to say that God created them, for verse 21 already has.

3) Even though it does not say that God predestined the unrepentant, if one group is chosen to receive mercy, then the other is not. Not choosing them guarantees their destruction, for all have sinned and none turn to God (Ro. 3:10, 23). In a roundabout way, doesn't that mean that the fates of the unrepentant are also determined?

4) Although the one who prepares the vessels for destruction is unexpressed, it can only be God, as the parallel "prepared for mercy" clearly shows.

It is important to notice that it doesn't say that God created evil men just so He could destroy them. In other words, Paul avoids making God the Creator of sinful men. When God first made humans He declared that they were "very good" (Gen. 1:31). However, things quickly changed. Adam sinned and his sinful nature was transmitted to the entire race. From Genesis 3 on God has been dealing with sinners, not innocent human beings. As Piper says, "When God passed over Esau and chose Jacob before they were born, there was no decree that *an innocent* Esau would be judged. Rather what God decreed was to pass Esau by, to withhold his electing love, and to give him up to wickedness. And as Esau acted in wickedness, he was accountable for that wickedness and deserved the indignation and judgment of God" (sermon by John Piper, Ro. 9:6-12, Dec. 8, 2002 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org). In a similar way, God did not make Pharaoh evil, but He did not extend mercy to him. This brought more of Pharaoh's evil nature out and proved that he was fit to be judged (Ro. 9:17; 2:5). As Murray says, "The main thought is that the destruction meted out to the vessels of wrath is something for which their precedent condition suits them. There is an exact correspondence between what they were in this life and the perdition to which they are consigned. This is another way of saying that there is a continuity between this life and the lot of the life to come" (Murray, II, 36) Hodge points out that what Paul means by "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" is illustrated by Pharaoh in the previous verse. God did not make Pharaoh evil but as his evil nature was revealed God dealt with him in a way that displayed punitive justice (Hodge, 321).

Secondly, we must realize that the punishment of the wicked is not an arbitrary act of God imposed upon men for no other reason than to make them miserable; it is designed to show God's displeasure against sin, and make known His true character (Hodge, 319). God does not enjoy the suffering of the wicked for He is by nature merciful and endures the wicked with longsuffering (9:22). At the same time, if He uses the wicked to display His glory and holy anger toward sin as He did with Pharaoh, He is free to do so.

Some miscellaneous thoughts:

1. Since salvation is based upon God's election of individuals in eternity past (Eph. 1:4), there must be a group of non-elect from all eternity as well. If so, then we have an eternal choice of non-election as well as election. The inference is clear and necessary, yet some shrink from drawing it.

However, to look at it from another perspective (a historical perspective), all humanity are vessels of wrath, since from birth all are deserving of judgment. Vessels of mercy only exist because God has decided to have mercy on some. But because God is eternal, His plans and

salvation are viewed in the present. Believers can be called “vessels of mercy” prior to their salvation—since God knows whom He will have mercy on even before they are born (9:11–13). But from our perspective, people are vessels of wrath until they believe. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:3, we “*were* by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

2. God’s work in predestination does not function the same way toward the elect and the non-elect. God positively intervenes in the lives of some to work regeneration and faith, but He does not actively work sin or unbelief in the lives of the unbeliever.

When God wills that we are saved, we are not forced to come to Christ against our will. Rather, God works within us to lead us to desire Christ. Philippians 2:13 says, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” His desire for our salvation is realized in our desire for Christ.

In a similar way, people who reject Christ are not being forced against their will. They reject Christ willfully. Allowing people to reject Christ is as much a sovereign act as intervening; both are the result of the will of God alone. Therefore, God is sovereign in salvation.

3. The activity of God with respect to the elect and the reprobate concerns God's justice. Election provides mercy for some; non-election provides justice for others. That is to say, God gives mercy to some and justice to others. No one is the victim of injustice. To fail to receive mercy is not to be treated unjustly. God is under no obligation to grant mercy to all—in fact He is under no obligation to grant mercy to any.

Verse 22 gives the reason why God endures vessels of wrath, namely, to demonstrate His wrath. Verse 23 gives the reason why God also prepares vessels of mercy—so that He might make known the riches of His glory by giving mercy. That is, God endures sinners instead of extinguishing them instantly in order to show both His wrath and His mercy. The vessels prepared for wrath receive what they justly deserve (destruction); God’s action toward them displays His holiness. Those prepared for mercy receive what they do not deserve (mercy); God’s action toward them shows the richness of His grace. In the previous illustration (9:17) God endured the evil heart of Pharaoh in order to show His power so His name would be known to the ends of the earth; through the same event He also showed mercy to those whom He had chosen by freeing them from the bondage of slavery. Pharaoh deserved what he got; the Israelites received what they didn’t deserve (mercy). In both cases God was glorified.

God’s ultimate purpose for the believer’s life is “to make known the riches of His glory.” In Ephesians 2:7 God says that His purpose in lavishing mercy on sinners is to demonstrate His abundant grace for all eternity.

The point that Paul is making in verses 14–23 is that no man can claim that God is unjust, for everyone is deserving of judgment. Likewise, no one can claim that they deserve grace, for they do not. Both vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath are from the same piece of clay (9:21).

When accusations are made that the sovereignty of God nullifies human responsibility, Paul responds offensively by stating that God has the right to do what He wants. In other words, instead of going on the defensive, he shows that the standard by which God must be judged is God Himself! He is the Potter. He has the right to judge sinful men or He has the right to withhold judgment and even use their

sin to make known His glory to us. Even though Paul doesn't reason as we may think he logically should, he can accomplish the same purpose by showing that God is fair (Moo, 608).