

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, cut through the waste of selfishness and debris of sin that surrounds my life, and bring me before the Father cleansed and penitent; save me, I pray, from my foolish assumptions and arrogant wrongdoing. Then take my brokenness and transform it into joy and happiness, take my stupidity and change it into creative zeal for You and for Your Kingdom. You alone can do this, Lord Jesus, for You are the Son of God; Alleluia, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Retailing

Retailing is the most common form of business and it affects the employment of large numbers of people. Pray for retailing and some of the major retailers in your country.

On-going prayers

- Pray about fishing, and the way it is policed and controlled
- Pray about racial tensions in the world, and against all racism
- Give thanks for electricity and for the good it can do for all

Meditation

The Lord is not always known to us,
But He is always revealing Himself:

He is the truth we have not heard before,
He is the hand that lifts our burdens.

He is the voice that speaks in wind and rain,
He is the power that controls creation.

He is the test that measures each intention,
He is the judge of truth and falsehood.

He is the guide always ready to direct,
He is the journey that leads to peace.

He is the One who knows no boundaries,
He is our God, who longs to save us.

The Lord is not always known to us,
But give thanks for His revelation!

Bible Study - Romans 9:19-29

¹⁹ You will then say to me; 'why does God still find fault?' ²⁰ But who are you, a mere mortal, to argue back to God? Will what is moulded into shape say to the one who does the moulding; 'why have you made me like this?' ²¹ Doesn't the potter have the right to make of the same clay one piece for special use and another for common use? ²² What if God, in order to show his wrath and power has endured with great persistence the objects of his wrath made for destruction, ²³ so that He might make known the riches of His glory for the objects of mercy which he has already prepared for glory, ²⁴ meaning us, those he has called not only from amongst Jews but also from amongst the Gentiles? ²⁵ Just as He says in Hosea:

'those who were not my people I will call "my people", and she who was not loved I will call "loved"; ²⁶ and in the very place where they were named "you are not my people" they will be addressed as "children of the living God!"'

²⁷ Isaiah also calls out concerning Israel:

'Though the number of the children of Israel are like the sand of the sea, only a small number of them will be saved; ²⁸ for both quickly and finally, the Lord will complete His work on earth.'

²⁹ As Isaiah predicted:

'If the Lord of hosts had not left some surviving descendants, we would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah!'

Review

With a variety of references to the Old Testament, Paul explains the sovereign will of God to bring about His salvation of the world by whatever means He chooses, without criticism from anyone or anything in His creation. We are the beneficiaries of His grace and His chosen partners in the work of the Gospel, not the critics of His grace! It is difficult to understand what Paul is saying in this passage, particularly where he talks about God's wrath, and objects 'made for destruction' (9:22), but if you read these quotes from the Old Testament, then all will be made clear!

As Paul writes, it becomes obvious that he is spending a considerable amount of energy confronting his opponents. In particular, he argued against Jews who insisted that there could be no compromise with the historic interpretation of God's will within Judaism. Yet Paul seems to have identified the same fault within the Judaism of his day that was exposed by Jesus, which was the insistence that their traditions were an accurate expression of God's intentions. When Jesus challenged this, He did so by quoting the words of the Old Testament, frequently using Isaiah (see Matt 13:14, 15:7, John 12:38f.), and explaining that the interpretation of Jewish faith by the Pharisees was neither an accurate reflection of God's laws in the Old Testament nor His plans for the world. In this passage, Paul does the same, using prophecies from Jeremiah (9:26), Hosea (9:25,26) and Isaiah (9:27-29). This attack is a powerful criticism of any who seek to counter God's intention to save the world through Christ, and by using His people to declare it.

The first prophecy is from both Isaiah (29:16) and Jeremiah (18:1-4), and we all know these passages because they talk about a potter shaping a piece of clay. Unfortunately, this has become 'spiritualised' by Christians today, and it is suggested that this picture presents an image of God dealing personally with us according to His will. Now it may be possible to extract something from this generalisation, but if you read the full texts from Jeremiah and Isaiah, they are far more controversial. They describe the sovereign will of God to raise nations to do His will and then to discard them, re-building His purposes through a new people. If you read Jeremiah 18:5-11 or Isaiah 29:13-21 you will find that this is perfectly clear and that the popular ideas say far less. This exercise will help us understand Paul's use of these texts here in Romans, and this fits with Paul's theme of God's sovereign will to achieve salvation through a new people, the Church, containing Jew and Gentile alike.

The quote from Hosea is more substantial, and comes from the early part of his prophecy (Hosea 2:23) which describes the prophet's own tragic experience of marriage. We will look at the details of this later, for it is fascinating to read about how God used Hosea's life to tell Israel deeper truths. However, the message from this quote yet again is the right of God to accept as His people whoever He will, with the implication that God has always had it in mind to call the Gentiles 'my people', as well as the Jews. Lastly, Paul quotes from Isaiah again (Is.10:22), where the prophet is faithful to the core message of his call (Isaiah 6). He picks out the historic truth that throughout the history of Israel, God has only ever worked through a small proportion of the His people, because the vast majority of them fail in their God-given task of being a light to the Gentiles (42:6, 49:6).

In this way, Paul explains to any Jew who will listen that their own history points the way to the life and death of Jesus and the Gospel; and this message has opened up the way for all people to be 'objects of God's mercy' if they will respond to His Word. We may not have to fight this battle today, but it was God's will that Paul should make this case and justify the Gospel to the Jews by detailed Scriptural argument from the Old Testament.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The potter and the clay
- Paul's conclusions about the image of the potter
- The prophecies of Isaiah and Hosea

Going Deeper

In order to understand this passage, we will have to concentrate on making sure that we are fully aware of the context and meaning of the passages of scripture used by Paul in this passage. When we have done that, we will be in a better place to assess the details of his argument which appear to us to be worded strangely (9:22,23).

The potter and the clay

The words of Isaiah were written down many years before those of Jeremiah (about 120 years), and it is likely that Jeremiah was familiar with Isaiah's writing. In Isaiah's call to prophesy (Isaiah 6), God tells Isaiah that the people of Israel will simply not understand or accept the truth of their calling or the words of their God (Isaiah 6:9-13). It was a stunning revelation and it coloured the whole of Isaiah's prophecies, and it is why Isaiah focussed all Israel's hopes on the figure of one person. In the early prophecies of Isaiah, he appears as a child born to be king (Is 7:14, 9:6, 11:1f.), later as a 'suffering servant' (Isaiah 53), and lastly as the Messiah, the anointed one (Isaiah 61:1f.). Whilst Isaiah spent much time prophesying about this new agent of God's power and authority, he also explained how and why God's people, the Israelites and Judeans turned a blind eye to their Covenant purpose under God. The passage Paul quotes is from such a section of Isaiah, where the prophet argues with the people of Israel about their desire to go their own way rather than the Lord's; and he uses the image of the potter and the clay to illustrate the ridiculous nature of Israel's rebellion against God:

¹⁵ Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?" ¹⁶ You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"? Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"? (Isaiah 29:15,16)

Then, more than a century later, as Jeremiah saw the coming signs of the invasion of Jerusalem by Babylon, he was given a message from the Lord that this was an act of judgement by the Lord against His rebellious people, and one day, he saw a potter making a pot, and recalled Isaiah's words. We all know the famous part of Jeremiah 18:1-4 in which he sees the potter remake a vessel according to his plans (the part we connect with spiritual reformation), but I quote below from what Jeremiah says after seeing the potter at work:

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. ¹¹ "Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.' (Jer 18:5-11)

Paul picks up the fact that Jeremiah is talking about nations, not individuals, and the prophecy contains a specific warning that God's people must do what the Lord says, otherwise they are not worthy of the name.

Paul's conclusions about the image of the potter

Paul builds on the image of the potter in his own way, though what he says about objects made by the potter for 'special' use and for 'common' use (9:21), and 'objects made for destruction' (9:22) are a little mystifying to us. The idea that God makes some things for one purpose and others for another is quite common in Paul, for example, this is how he describes the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:14-26) in that part of this famous chapter which is often missed out when read in church because of the length of the chapter! Paul's argument here is that we cannot argue with God about our particular role in His Church, for we are all important in our own way, but some have a higher worldly profile or apparent value than others, and we should not be deceived into thinking that this is any pointer towards God's favour. In terms of the Jews and the Gentiles, neither should be jealous of the other in terms of the way that God has used them as nations to affect His plan of salvation.

The passage about the 'objects of wrath' that serve to show the generosity of God towards 'objects of mercy', is similar to an idea that crops up in a number of places in Paul's writings (see 1 Thess 2:15,16). This is that resistance to the Gospel (as shown in this case by the Jews) only serves to show the greatness of God in salvation. In contrast, Paul appears to accept that those Jews who actively oppose the Gospel set themselves up for destruction, for their rebellion is in fulfilment of prophecies by Isaiah and Jeremiah. The nations of Israel and Judah had been destroyed before by the Assyrians (as prophesied by Isaiah), and the Babylonians (as prophesied by Jeremiah), and those who rejected God's work now merely set themselves up for the same consequence of earthly destruction.

The prophecies of Hosea and Isaiah

Paul reinforces his point with prophecies taken from Hosea and Isaiah. They both show how God works to eliminate opposition and perform works of righteousness that are beyond our understanding. Firstly, he quotes directly from Hosea 2:23 (9:25,26). The background to this prophecy is that Hosea was called by God to marry a prostitute, and the first child of the marriage was clearly Hosea's; he was named 'Jezreel',

which was a name reflecting (in a rather complicated way – see Hosea 1:4,5) something of Hosea's prophetic task. That was relatively straightforward; but the interest comes in the second and the third children of the marriage, in which Hosea was clearly not sure whether the children were his, so he named the children with Hebrew names which reflected his uncertainty about his wife's fidelity; a daughter called 'not pitied' and a son called 'not my people'. In a prophetic vision (2:1-23), Hosea was told that God would turn around the disgrace of the birth of these two children and change their names. The significance of this for Paul is simple. God is in the business of making those who are regarded as illegitimate, legitimate; by which He means the Gentiles; and it is all there is God's Word!

The last two quotes from Isaiah are from Isaiah 10:22,23, except that the references to Sodom and Gomorrah are taken from Isaiah's earliest prophecies in which he likens Israel to the nation of Sodom, which was destroyed by the Lord because of its wanton sin (see Isaiah 1:9,10, and 3:10 and also Genesis 18:16f.). Throughout Isaiah's prophecies, a theme persists of a surviving 'remnant' (as explained above), and Paul uses these two quotes to indicate again his conviction that only destruction awaits opposition to God's Gospel call. We cannot say that Paul is anything other than distressed at what he has to say, for that is the theme of the whole passage (9:1f.), but Paul is nothing if not convinced of the truth of Scriptures, and he feels that he cannot escape the consequences of prophecy; indeed, he has a duty to point it out.

Application

Some may find this passage of Scripture difficult because of its talk about wrath and destruction. I think Paul would reply that you cannot have salvation, except from the alternative, and God's favour can only be given to those who accept Him as Lord. Rejection of God is its own form of destruction because it is a denial of one's maker. In this passage, he says that this is true for Jews as well as Gentiles. Throughout his written works, Paul talks about a church made up of those who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour irrespective of race or background, and this is surely the only way that the Gospel can be made available to the whole world. Paul saw that the great privileges of the Israelite people would one day have to be shared with all people who responded to the Gospel, because the heritage passed through Jesus Christ on the Cross, and not through any other single Jew. Jesus was the sole connection between Old and New Testaments, but He was a sufficient connection, for all God's promises were complete and fulfilled in Him, rather than the nations of the Jewish people themselves.

All such arguments about the nature of our faith need to be rooted in Scripture, and this is the merit of this passage of Scripture. It shows us that Paul paid detailed attention to Scripture, and sets a standard for us as we read the Old Testament and try to make something of it. But his message remains consistent. God is sovereign, and He will accomplish His salvation as He will, and He will show favour to people and choose them according to His plan for the whole of the world. We would love to know the details of this greater plan, but our role is to play our part within it!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the Biblical image of the potter, and read some of the texts about it. How can we best use this story line today?
2. What do you understand as 'objects of wrath' and 'objects of mercy' (9:22,23). Is Paul talking about people or nations here?
3. What place do the Israelite people have in God's purposes today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

How good are you at using Scripture? You may feel awkward about the question, yet I can assure you that almost everyone who uses Scripture, including myself, feels inadequate before the vast amount of revelation to be found within the Bible. There is an extraordinary depth of information within the Bible as a whole, yet the only way I know of becoming familiar with it is to read it, and read it regularly. However much you read of studies such as this or of any other books about the Bible, there is no substitute for reading the Bible for what it is, God's Word. By doing this, you will find that the Lord will enable you to be familiar with what He needs you to know!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through this passage carefully and read through the passages of scripture used, carefully. There is no substitute for getting to know these texts. When you have done this, try to write out your own version of Paul's argument. This will clarify whether you have understood the passage!*
- *Pray for those within the church who tend to avoid the Old Testament because they find it hard to understand. Pray that God will reveal His Word to them anew.*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, give us hearts that yearn to understand and know Your Word. May we look forward to reading it, be prepared to study it where necessary, and use it and remember it in our daily lives; and by so doing may we give glory to You, Almighty God, our Saviour and Lord: AMEN
