

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 9:19-21

Study Notes

A series of questions designed to explain Israel's failures and God's plan of salvation for both the Israelites and the Gentiles.

The next question: "One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?"

- **The "Us" in Verse 19:**

Paul is linking himself to his fellow Israelites. He's asking, "If God allowed Israel to be hardened, just as he did Pharaoh, why does he still blame Israel for their failures?"

Paul's three responses – based on God's uncontested rights when it comes to humans.

The opening response: Verse 20:

"But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?"

Paul is quoting from Isaiah 29:16 and Isaiah 45:9, Isaiah's arguments against Israel.

"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"?"

“Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘He has no hands’?”

Some clear statements about God’s rights and authorities.

1. Like a potter, God has the ultimate authority over his creations:

Romans 9 is not about individual election or lostness. It is about Israel’s national destiny and how the Gentiles fit into God’s plans for salvation.

Paul’s switch from “Why does God still blame us?” to “Who are you, a human being, to talk back to God”: It’s as if a single human being stands before Paul and asks, “If God is sovereign, why does he still blame us?” Paul is just asking and answering accordingly. He’s still talking about Israel, not individuals.

- **The Potter and the Wheel:**

The sight of a village potter at his wheel was daily occurrence in Palestine during the Old Testament as well as Paul’s era. Example: Jeremiah’s visit to the “Potter’s House” – Jeremiah 18

The context of Isaiah 29:16 and Isaiah 45:9:

Isaiah 29: God says to Israel, “You turn things upside down.” God is complaining that Israel was attempting to reverse their roles. “[It was] as if the potter had become the pot and the pot the potter.”

Isaiah 45: God pronounces a “woe” to “him who quarrels with his Maker”. Israel – (the clay) – is challenging God to explain what He is doing (what he is making).

“... God intervenes in secular history as he wills, separating to himself a people by election, cutting right across all natural blood relationships.” (Emil Brunner, Romans)

That's the right context for Paul's message in Romans 9. Speaking to Israel as if they were one person, he makes the point from Isaiah's examples.

"Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?"

- **The Potter's Wheel: Israel and the Gentiles.**

Out of the same clay – God can make some pottery for special uses and some for common use. The metaphor: Israel is the "special use" pottery. See: Genesis 12:3; Deuteronomy 7:6-8

Israel is the "special pottery". Above all the other people on earth, God chose her, beautified her, and intended to bless the nations through her. That was her purpose.

Paul hasn't forgotten the "common clay". That's the Gentiles; that's you and me. We are the common clay. And folks, there's a whole lot more common clay on this planet than the "special vessels" known as "true Israelites".

The Gentiles are the "common vessels": Paul outlines this, starting in Romans 9:22:

What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?

What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

God is free to show mercy and free to harden others in full compatibility to his character. What happened with Pharaoh? God

kept sending plagues to break him; to get him to acknowledge that Yahweh was God – not the gods of Egypt.

Pharaoh hardened his own heart five times. Finally, God took Pharaoh's continual hardening and used it to set up Israel's Exodus. God didn't force Pharaoh to go down the path of rebellion; he used Pharaoh's hardening to accomplish God's own purposes.

Paul is making a parallel statement here about Israel and the Gentiles.

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Next time: A look at Paul's comparison of the Jews and the Gentiles – as well as God's sovereignty in salvation for both.