

God the Potter, Israel the Clay

📖 Romans 9:19-23

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We open our Bible's again to Romans 9. This is not easy material. Romans 9-11 is not milk doctrine, it's steak. If it were milk it would be easy to understand and digest. But because it's steak it's difficult to understand and digest. Personally, I have been having a very difficult time understanding and digesting this material. Day after day, morning and evening, I've been thinking about and trying to understand what Paul is saying because I have been sensing that something is not quite right.

When you're in seminary you take hermeneutics courses and these courses are designed to teach you the rules of reading, how to read and interpret literature without reading your own ideas into the text. It's very hard to do because you have been told what certain texts mean and so when you come to the text you are pre-loaded with information about what it means and so you read it through that lens and of course that's what you conclude. It's just obvious that what you presupposed it means is what it means. The discipline is to train yourself to set aside what you think it means, that pre-loaded information and just ask, "What do I see here?" "What is actually here?" Not "What have I been told is here?" The key is to forget what you've been told is here and just ask. "What is here?" When you do that you're in a position to discover the meaning of the text.

When we talk about the rules of hermeneutics the first three rules are always context, context, context. This cannot be overstated. Context is king. Words are defined by contexts, not dictionaries. Dictionaries don't define anything, they describe the way a word has been used in various contexts so we see that the meanings of a word in a dictionary come from the various contexts the word has been used in and not the dictionary.

When we find ourselves in Romans 9 we have to look into many contexts because Paul is quoting several OT contexts. The high proportion of OT quotes increases the level of difficulty significantly. They say that there is not much new in the NT, that God almost said everything He wanted to say in the OT. That's so true. You cannot understand the NT if you do not understand the OT. And what is new in the NT are referred to as "mysteries." There are eight or nine mysteries in the NT. But even the context there is the OT. Most of what is here is not new. Note that in 9:4-5 we don't have a quote from the OT but they are all allusions to the OT, "Who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple

service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ..." Those are all allusions to specific OT institutions and events that give a grand picture of God's plan for Israel. Note as we scan through the following quotes that there is a particular sequence in Israel's history that is being sketched. He backs all the way back to Abraham and in 9:7 he quotes Genesis 21:12 directly saying, "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." In 9:9, another OT quote, this one from Gen 18:10, earlier than the former but the justification for it, "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON." In 9:12, another OT quote, this one from the time of Isaac in Gen 25:23, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." 9:13 is interesting because it comes from much later in Israel's history, Mal 1:2, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT SAY I HATED." In 9:15 we another one, this one goes back to the time of Moses, Exod 33:19, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION." In 9:17 he reminds us of Pharaoh in Exod 9:16, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH." And today we come into 9:20-21 and here there are no quotes but there are heavy allusions to the imagery of the OT potter and clay from Jer 18, "The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or 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?" This is all OT and it continues through the rest of the chapter. So if we don't understand the OT we're not going to understand Paul's use here in the NT. That's why I'm taking so much time. It's really difficult. I mentioned last time that Gentiles come into this text and we are Greek in our mentality and so we are already pre-loaded with the Augustinian predestination; God chose Jacob to go to heaven and Esau to go to hell; God chose Moses to go to heaven and Pharaoh to go to hell. The problem with that is that the OT passages quoted have nothing to do with going to heaven and hell.

There are a couple of things that I think are key and if you go wrong you can quickly get the wrong idea of what the text is teaching. First, just as a simple example, take a look at Rom 9:13, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED." How many times have you had an argument with someone over this verse? Many times people say that means Jacob is elect to heaven and Esau is elect to hell. Other people struggle because they read Western concepts of love and hate into the text as God having some emotional anger toward Esau. What does this really mean? The text says "LOVED" and "HATED." What does that mean? We went to several passages showing that the Oriental concept of love and hate is to prefer one over the other. Gen 29 says Isaac loved Rachel and hated Leah. But this did not mean that he was antagonistic to Leah; he actually loved her enough to have five sons with her. The meaning is that he preferred Rachel. Same thing in the NT when it comes to discipleship. Jesus says, if you want to be My disciple you have to hate your mother and your father and your brothers and sisters and even your own life. Many people have stumbled over those passages too but they simply mean prefer Me over them, put Me first over them. He certainly does not mean to be antagonistic to your parents. But you can see how you can radically misunderstand these verses and that will get you going down the wrong path. Now that we got that straightened out, here's a second example; this one a little more difficult. Look at the same verse, Rom 9:13. Who

did God prefer over the other? If you say Jacob and not Esau you would be wrong. How could I be wrong? That's what the verse says? Where does the quote come from? Mal 1:2ff. Who does Jacob represent in Mal 1:2ff? Israel. The whole nation Israel. Jacob does not refer to an individual in Mal 1:2ff. Jacob the individual had been dead for 1,600 years when this verse was revealed to Malachi. Who does Esau represent in Mal 1:2ff? Edom. The whole nation of Edom. Esau does not refer to an individual in Mal 1:2ff and He doesn't stand for Esau the individual here in Romans 9 either. Jacob and Esau are being viewed as nations. What does this mean for the interpretation of Rom 9:13? That God was not preferring one individual over another but one nation over another. The individuals themselves are not in view other than to say they represented two nations. It's something like using George Washington to represent the United States. So if you go through the text and you are thinking in terms of individuals then you are missing the point of the text because Paul is not dealing with individuals in this passage. And yet that is what so many commentators assume and so they obviously conclude that God chooses certain individuals to go to heaven and certain individuals to go to hell. I'm trying to say that is not what the text is talking about. None of these contexts are about heaven and hell. Third, take the next two names brought into the discussion. In 9:15 we see Moses. Who is Moses? Moses is an individual but who is Moses? Moses is the leader of the nation Israel. So he represents the nation Israel. In 9:17 who is mentioned? Pharaoh. Who is Pharaoh? Pharaoh is an individual but Pharaoh is also the leader of Egypt and thus represents the nation Egypt. What I'm trying to say is that Paul is explaining God's plan for nations, for kingdoms, that it's not really about the individuals. The individuals are there, true enough, but the real issue is the nations these people either stand at the head of or lead. The passage is about God's dealings with nations and why the nation Israel did not receive her covenanted kingdom and what God is now doing among Gentile nations and what God will do with Israel after God is done working with Gentile nations.

It's very difficult for people of a Western mindset to see that individuals do not always simply refer to individuals. This is why we struggle when reading the Bible. We are so individual oriented that we can't see that individuals in Oriental culture often represent whole groups of people. Take for example, Adam and Christ. There are those in Adam and those in Christ. Adam represents all people who are identified with him in unrighteousness whereas Christ represents all people identified with him in righteousness. We understand that Adam and Christ represent two peoples so my question is why can't we see that here? Jacob represents Israel; Esau represents Edom; Moses represents Israel; Pharaoh represents Egypt. We should be able to see this. We struggle to see this because we read through our Western lens and say, "What do you mean he's not talking about the choice of individuals? Obviously he's talking about individuals." Individuals get tied up in it but almost incidentally. They're certainly not the focus. From the beginning of Romans 9 to the end of Romans 11 the focus is on Israel and God's strategy with Gentile nations as they relate to Israel.

Look, once more at Romans 9:3-5 and see if you don't observe that Paul is speaking of the nation Israel. Paul's all upset. He says, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites. Who's he speaking of? Individuals? No. He's speaking of

the nation Israel. Of course individuals make up the nation but look at the focus on the nation in verse 4, "To whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all God..." All those things belonged to the nation Israel, not to individuals. They were national assets, not individual assets. Look at 9:30, "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith;" The Greek word "Gentiles" is *εθνος* and can easily be translated "nations." He's speaking of nations as a whole, that those among the nations as a whole attained righteousness. This was the strange phenomena. Note the contrast with Israel in 9:31, "but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law." Israel clearly is being viewed as a nation. In 10:1, Paul says, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation." Who is the "them?" "Them" is the nation Israel. Paul wasn't praying for individual Israelites to come to salvation in this verse. "Salvation" is going to be a sticky wicket here for those of you who can't think of it as anything other than going to heaven because that is not at all what it means here. There were already individual Jews coming to Christ every day. What Paul is praying for here is the nation Israel being delivered from Gentile dominion and taken into the kingdom. Rom 10:19, national or individual focus? National. "But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? First Moses says, "I WILL MAKE YOU JEALOUS BY THAT WHICH IS NOT A NATION, BY A NATION WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING WILL I ANGER YOU." Verse 21, "But as for Israel He says, "ALL THE DAY LONG I HAVE STRETCHED OUT MY HANDS TO A DISOBEDIENT AND OBSTINATE PEOPLE." National or individual focus? National! Romans 11:1, "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? What people? National Israel. 11:2 Elijah pled with God against Israel? Clearly the nation Israel. Yes, there are believers and unbelievers within Israel but the point in view is that God has chosen the nation Israel and because they did not understand Gentile nations have come into a position of blessing. But even that blessing among Gentiles has a purpose for the nation Israel. Rom 11:11, "I say then, they," the nation Israel, "did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the nations, to make Israel jealous." God's not done with the nation Israel. 11:12, "Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the nations, how much more will their fullness be!" 11:13, "But I am speaking to you who are nations. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of nations, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them." Only usage in Rom 9-11 of "save" in the sense of having eternal life, only one, and it's because it's during the age of nations, when God is primarily dealing with nations. But once God is done working with the nations, 11:25 tells us "a mystery..." "that a partial hardening has happened to the nation Israel until the fullness of the Gentile nations has come in; and so all the nation Israel will be saved" and he goes right back to the OT to prove that God will deliver the nation Israel from their sins and, of course, deliver them from Gentile dominion and take them into the kingdom. It's a national focus in these chapters and you have to keep that in mind. It is a key to understanding that God is not talking about election of individuals to salvation but the election of the nation Israel to serve a purpose in history, a purpose that they rejected, but that did not mean God rejected them. God made promises to that nation and so ultimately God will keep His promises to them.

We come back to Rom 9 and the concern is why the nation Israel whom God foreknew hadn't realized her blessings in the kingdom. Paul is explaining that God's strategy with the nation Israel in the OT was to make His name known throughout the whole earth. To maximize His exposure to the Gentile nations He uses the birth narratives of Isaac and Jacob and Esau to show that the family of Israel was created supernaturally and contrary to cultural norms. To further maximize His exposure to the world Paul uses the exodus narrative of Pharaoh and Moses to show that God shows mercy on Israel and hardened Gentile nations. The grand idea is that God has a strategy He is working for Israel and Gentile nations that is not influenced by our works or our will or by how hard we try. It is simply based on God's desire to carry out His plan in the way He has decided is best and that best way is the way that draws people's attention to Him.

In Romans 9:19 we see the illustration of the potter and the clay, a very commonly misunderstood illustration. I have misunderstood it for a long time. To get started, remember, that Paul has nations chiefly in view. This is about the potters right over a specific nation. In 9:19 Paul introduces a hypothetical objector with the phrase, **You will say to me then...** This is a person who is against Paul, an opponent. He doesn't think it's just of God to shape history the way He wants to independent of our input. The objection is, **"Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"** In other words, how can God **find fault** among men when He is the one who is shaping and controlling history the way He wants? Paul's not going to detail it all out but what he does do is a lot like what God did to Job. He said, I'm the Creator and who do you think you are questioning me. I question you...not the other way around.

Verse 20, **On the contrary, who are you, O man,** note, **O man.** It's emphatic in the original. The emphasis is on the fact that the person questioning God here is just a **man. Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?** To **answer back** to God is as the New Jerusalem Bible says, to "cross-examine God" or as I've translated, "contend against God." It's an improper attitude toward God. It's okay to ask God questions when all you are doing is trying to figure something out. That's not the problem, the problem is when we are questioning the way God is running history. We're in no position to do that because we don't know all the details of what He's doing with all the kingdoms of the world. So to question Him in this way is completely out of line.

Now the potter and the clay analogy is used several times in the OT; Isa 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:6ff. Turn to Jer 18. They all deal with the contrast of the Creator and the creature as a qualitative contrast and not quantitatively and because of the qualitative difference between Him and us there is a proper attitude of humility when we come to Him. But Jer 18 is the most pertinent use of potter and the clay because it stands directly behind Romans 9. Observe in 18:1 Jeremiah getting instruction from the LORD who said, "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you." Jeremiah's going to get an object lesson before he gets to see how God is going to apply this lesson. This is very concrete, go watch a potter with the wheel crafting a vessel out of clay and then I'll connect that to biblical theology. In verse 3, "then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel." The way they did this was they had a thin throwing

head on the top with a wooden shaft extending down into a pit which was attached to a heavier wheel below. The throwing wheel had a wooden collar around it so that the potter could turn it with his hands or feet. As they would work with the clay it would often not cooperate with the potter and so the potter would have to squash it back into a lump and start all over. Verse 4, Jeremiah is watching the potter, "But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make." That's the object lesson; Jeremiah saw a potter, the clay and the wheel, the clay was spoiled so the potter remade it. Now in verse 5 the LORD is going to apply this object lesson to biblical theology so that Jeremiah sees clearly. "Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, 6 "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" In other words, Jeremiah was writing when Israel was in exile, the LORD was the potter and the clay, which was the nation Israel, had spoiled in his hand and the question the LORD is asking Jeremiah is, can I not remake Israel? Can I not bring them out from being a vessel of ordinary use in the world and make them a special vessel among all the nations? Can I not do that? It was, of course, to encourage Jeremiah while in exile to Babylon. Jeremiah was very discouraged over his nation. Now what do you see in Romans 9 but the same thing? Israel is now going to go into exile again, this time under Rome and this time it's not Jeremiah who's discouraged over his nation but Paul. Let's read on in Jer 18:6, "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel." Who is the clay? It's very clear who the clay is. The clay is Israel. The clay has always been Israel and always will be Israel. Can God re-make Israel into a vessel of honor? Absolutely. Does the clay in Romans 9 have anything to do with God choosing to save some individuals and not others? Absolutely not. It has absolutely nothing to do with it, it never has and never will, that is some very imaginative exegesis. The clay has always been the nation Israel. And look how God deals with various nations as they relate to Israel in verse 7, "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; ⁸if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it." Look at that. What's the context? Individuals or nations? Nations. Is God just arbitrarily assigning kingdoms to judgment? No. There are conditional prophecies of judgment on kingdoms in history. Remember Ninevah? Ninevah was a nasty kingdom. What did God tell Jonah to do? Go to Ninevah. What was the message? Yet 40 days and Ninevah will be overturned. 40 more days God was going to put up with that evil empire. But what does verse 8 say? "If that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it." And what did Ninevah do when Jonah finally got his rear in gear? They turned from their evil. And so what did the Lord do? He relented of the judgment He had "planned to bring on it." There are conditional prophecies in Scripture and God deals with nations on the basis of their response to Him. It's not arbitrarily assigning them to judgment. That's why there is hope for a nation that is going negative to God. It's not because of 2 Chron 5, the passage everybody in America misquotes and applies to America. That verse about "if My people who are called by My name" cannot by any stretch of the imagination apply to America because there is only one nation on earth who has ever been God's people called by God's name and that is the nation Israel. It's a description of the covenant people Israel and America is not a covenant people. But Jer 18 can be quoted of America. It does apply validly to various nations and kingdoms. We go on

and note that the reverse is also true. Note Jer 18:9, "Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; ¹⁰if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it." So is God sovereign over the rise and fall of nations? You better believe it. Is the rise and fall of nations arbitrarily decided by God? No. It depends on how that nation responds to Him. Verse 11, here's God telling Jeremiah how to apply this to the nation Israel who was in Exile at the time to Babylon, "So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds." ' Why would God say that to Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem? Why, if He is the potter and they are the clay, would He say to the clay, now turn from your evil way? Because the Potter does not arbitrarily remake the clay! It is often forgotten that there is clay that is workable and clay that is not, but ask any potter and they will tell you. God as the Potter takes into consideration the malleability of the clay. But note God's omniscience in verse 12, "But they will say, 'It's hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.' So the Lord knows what they will do but that does not mean that they are unable to turn from their evil ways and the Lord will remake them into a great nation. My point is to show you that the clay in the analogy is not in a deterministic role. The potter can remake Israel into a great nation, but they must turn from their ways for Him to do so! And that's the background for the illustration in Romans 9. God is talking about His rights over the nation Israel in this present time to take some of the clay that is still malleable and remake it into vessels for honor while allowing clay that is not malleable to simply be used for common purposes. He's talking, of course, about the remnant of Israel at this present time over and against the non-remnant. And yet 999 out of a 1000 when people read Romans 9:19-23 they think, "Well, I guess God fashions one for hell and another for heaven." That is as much nonsense as it sounds like nonsense. It is certainly not the conclusion of careful study. Sadly, many great minds have said, this but I must say it is an entirely bogus conclusion. More next time so tune in...and I appreciate your prayers because this is very difficult material.