

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Romans 9:14-33**  
**“Asking The Hard Questions”**

January 15, 2017  
(2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Epiphany)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

IIA3. ROMANS 9:14-33 "ASKING THE REALLY HARD QUESTIONS"

What Are The Promises To Esau?

3. 9:14-32 Question And Answer (4 Cycles: a. What? b. Why? // b' What? a' Why?).

Return To The Rhetoric Of Diatribe, Aware Of Misunderstandings

a) vv.14-18 Question And Answer: What Shall We Say? Is God Unjust? (a-b//a'-b')

- 14a Q1 **WHAT** shall we say then? //v.30a, Q1+Q2+Negation+Affirmation, New Unit In Section (3:5,4:1,6:1,7:7,8:31,9:30)  
 Is Election Unjust? Logical Objection, *adikia* = wickedness
- b Q2 Is there injustice on God's part? //3:5, Dt. 32:4, Attack On The Character, God Is Not Unjust Or Arbitrary  
 Election Is Not Human Willing Or Doing, But God's Mercy
- c A2 By no means!  
 Indicates A False Conclusion, Leads To A Correction  
 Link words = *mercy* (vv.15a,18, 23), *power* (v.17b, 22)
- 15a A1a For he says to Moses, Later, God's Self-Description To Moses, Election = Mercy, Scripture + Inference (2x)  
**"I will have mercy/ on whom I have mercy, Ex. 33:19 (LXX), Exodus Period, Mercy/Compassion Reversed**  
**and I will have compassion/ on whom I have compassion."** See Actions, *mercy* (vv.15a, 16,18), Later  
 God's Election Saved His People, Not Chronological Order
- b So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, v.16//v.18, Formula *ara oun*, Not a human achievement  
 but upon God's mercy. //9:11-12 To Jacob, *mercy/power*
- 17a a' For the scripture says to Pharaoh, Earlier, Mercy Reversed, Pharaoh Not Just Spared But Elected, Used As Instrument  
**"I have 'raised you up' for the very purpose of showing my power in you, Heb./LXX = spared, Ex. 9:16, 9:13-35**  
**so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."** Hint Of Gentiles!  
 Inclusion "mercy"
- b So then he has mercy/ upon whomever he wills, //v.15a, Moses Responds; Calvin: Romans, 203  
 and he hardens the heart/ of whomever he wills. //v.17, Pharaoh Resists, Ex. 4:21, 9:12, 10:1, 20, 27, et. al.  
 1:18-32, 2:5, Dynamic Interaction, God's Election + Exodus Saved The People
- b) vv.19-29 Question And Answer: What Does He Find Fault? Is God A Bully?** 4's  
 If Mighty Pharaoh Could Not Resist, Who Can? Any Room For Human Initiative?
- 19a Q1 You will say to me then, Diatribe/Dialog Formula, Q1 + Q2, New Thought Unit In Section  
 b **WHY** does he still find fault? //Wisdom 12:12, Job 9:12, Human Response Is Still Involved  
 c Q2 For who can resist his will?" //3:7, Is God A Bully? Moves Forward Despite Human Resistance  
 4 Questions
- 20a AQ1 But who are you, oh man, to answer back (argue) to God? Direct Address, //2:1, 3, Is. 29:16, 45:9  
 Already A Rebellion
- b AQ2 **Will what is molded say to its molder,**  
**'Why have you made me *thus*?' Is 29:16, 45:9, 64:8, Job 9:12**  
 Distance Between God And Creatures; We Do Not Have *Maker's Knowledge*
- 21 AQ3 Has the potter no right over the clay, Creator Has Freedom  
 to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? **Jer. 18:2-11**
- 22 AQ4 What if God, Hypothetical Inquiry, God The Potter // Wis. 12:3-18, 15:7 Themes  
 although willing to show his wrath and to make known his power, *power/mercy*  
 has endured with much patience/ the vessels of wrath made for destruction? Those Who Do Not Respond  
 23 And, what if, in order to make known the riches of his glory/ for the vessels of mercy, //v.21  
 which he has prepared beforehand for glory, Election At Work Even Now, Circle Is Expanded  
 24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? //b.11b, Punch Line!  
 No Apodosis/Conclusion, 4 Scripture Warrants: 2 Hosea, 2 Isaiah
- 25 AS1 As indeed he says in Hosea, All 4 Highlight God's Elective Love  
 Expanded **"Those who were not my people/ I will call 'my people,' Hos. 2:23 On Apostate Israel**  
**and her who was not beloved/ I will call 'my beloved.'" Gentile Outsiders Included (2x)**  
 2 Hosea + 2 Isaiah Quotes
- 26 AS2 **"And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' Hos. 1:10**  
**they will be called / 'sons of the living God.'" God Creates/Fashions His People With A Call**  
 Gentiles Included (vv.25-26), Israel Continued (vv.27-29)
- 27 AS3 But (*de*, Now) Isaiah cries out concerning (on behalf of ) Israel: **Hos. 2:1+Is. 10:22-23, 28:22 Shortened**  
**"'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea,' Hosea 1:10, Calls Jews**  
 Contracted **only a remnant of them will be saved;** First use of *saved* // Is 10:1-13 (4x), 11:13, 9:6, God Divides  
 28 **for the Lord will execute his sentence upon the earth with rigor and dispatch."**
- 29 AS4 And as Isaiah predicted, God Still At Work In Israel By Election, The Destiny Of God's People (2x)  
**Is. 1:2, 9, Time Of Assyrian Captivity Transposed**

**"If the Lord of hosts had not left us children (seed),** Remnant Only, Total Destruction  
**we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomor'rah."** Word Not Failed, Gen. 19:24-25

**a') vv.30-31 Question And Answer, Inclusion Of Gentiles By Trust.**

- 30a Q1 **WHAT** shall we say, then? // v.14a, Rhetorical Formula Question: Bridge, Summary  
Not Followed By False Inference But A True One  
b A,Q2 That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness Topic Introduced, v.23, Shift To Current Situation  
have attained it, that is, righteousness through **faith** (trust); Link Word: vv.30b, 32b, 33  
31 but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law God Did Not Fail; His People Did!  
did not succeed in fulfilling that law? (Yes) T. Dan. 6:10, Unable, Could Not, Sin

**b') vv.32-33 Question And Answer: Exclusion Of Some By Works, Supporting Text.**

- 32a Q2 **WHY?** //v.19b, End Of Series, No. 4
- b A2 Because they did not pursue it through **faith** (trust/*piseteos*), //v11b works, Earning/Performance/Debt  
but as if it were based on works. Keeping The Law Is Not The Heart Of A Relationship With God
- 33a S They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, Gal. 3:23-26  
b as it is written, //1 Pt. 2:6-8  
c **"Behold, I am laying in Zion/ //10:11 (Christ), Blended Text, Is. 28:16, 8:14-15**  
d **a stone/ that will make men stumble,** //1 Cor. 1:23  
**a rock/ that will make them fall;/**  
e **and he who believes (trust/*pisteuo*) in him**  
**will not be put to shame."** At The Judgment, Alternative Path = Trust  
*Faith* Is Responsive, Evidence Based Trust, Confirmed By Character And Action

### A Brief Treatment Of Romans 9:14-33

The text before us (IIIA3. 9:14-33) completes the *Diatribes and Scripture* section of Panel A (9:1-33). The surface structure is four paragraphs (a. vv.14-18, b. vv.19-29 // a' vv.30-31, b' vv.32-33) in step parallelism using alternating questions: *What?* (vv.14a//30a) and *Why?* (vv.19b//32a). The genre is diatribe, an conversation with an opponent that lends vividness to the writing. The extensive quotation of Scripture throughout (vv.15, 17, 20b, 25, 26, 27-28, 29, 33) as well as several allusions indicates Paul grounds his arguments in the Jewish Bible, their common sacred text. The theological center is Paul's recasting of Israel's election, and to secure this he must defend God's person and method against calumny.

The previous unit ended with a hard word from Malachi, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." Since this choice is not based on actions good or bad (9:11a), the question arises, "Is there injustice (Gk. *adikia*, wickedness) on God's part?" to which Paul replies, "By no means!" Even allowing for rhetorical hyperbole, the question stands, as does Paul rejection. The rhetorical bridge, "What shall we say then?" indicates the logical linkage. The format of a. vv.14-18 is concentric with a question (v.14b) and answer (v.14c) at the center and the verb *say(s)* as an inclusion (v.14a//vv.15a, 17a). Two questions (vv.14a, b) are posed and answered in reverse order (vv.14c, vv.15-18). The double *For/Gk. gar* (vv.15a, 17a) indicate Paul's reasons, and the examples of Moses (vv.15-16) and Pharaoh (vv.17-18) each have three parts: 1. An introduction using *say(s)*, 2. An Exodus quote, 3. A Conclusion (*So/So then*). Paul's quotes are not proof texts but refer back to the story from which they are drawn. After the Golden Calf (Ex. 32), the people are chastened; Moses then goes into the tent to intercede and there asks to see God's glory. As the Lord passes before Moses, who's now hidden in a cleft and shielded by a divine hand, God acclaims of himself the text (Ex. 33:19) Paul quotes, "I will have mercy..." God chastens but does not abandon his people. God's choice is mercy and compassion. Wicked Pharaoh—having failed to heed multiple warnings—is now a foil for getting God's name and power before the nations. Whether you yield or resist, God will use you.

The next paragraph (3b. vv.19-29) begins with a rhetorical bridge, "You will say to me then..." followed by two questions drawn from the assertion of God's power (v.17b): 1) If everything is determined, where is the fault? and, 2) Does human will mean nothing? The answer to the first consists of four questions (vv.20a, b, 21, 22-24) intended to reset the relationship between man and God (v.20a) and builds on the Potter analogy from Jeremiah and Isaiah (vv.20b-24). The weakness of the analogy is that clay is passive, but people are not and push back to resist the divine will. Two kinds of peoples are under construction even now, and our response to God's molding determines our outcome. The first question is then answered in vv.25-29 in four Scripture quotes in two clusters, the first from Hosea (vv.25-26), the second from Isaiah (vv.27-29). Israel resisted God, and yet God showed mercy in Hosea's day. Israel resisted in Isaiah's day, and yet a remnant was preserved. You may resist God's will and be reclaimed, or you may remain steadfast in rebellion, but it's not recommended. In an instant judgment will come *with rigor and dispatch* (v.28), some vessels put on display, others forever shattered.

A second pair of *What?* and *Why?* questions (a' vv.30-31, b' vv.32-33) conclude the larger thought unit. Each has a rhetorical bridge (*What shall we say then?* [v.30a] // *What?* [v.32a]) as an introduction. The *What* question is answered by a question posed as a conundrum. "Could it be," asks Paul, that what the Gentiles did not pursue, they have now found, and that what the Jews pursued has landed them in the wrong camp" (vv.30b-31)? The answer to both is *Yes*. There is no way through human effort or moral striving to earn God's favor because we are too weak and compromised by Sin to pull it off. The law reveals our sin; it's not a ladder to climb up to God's favor. But if we place our trust and reliance in what God does for us weaklings in Jesus Christ, we are reset into a right relationship to our Maker. The answer to the *Why* question makes the choice clear: it's either *trust* or *strict accounting*, and the first succeeds while the last one always fails. The composite quote of v.33 means that Jesus is the place some fall and others find hope and help, now and later. God's offer of mercy is consistent, and to reject it is self-condemnation.

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## ASKING THE HARD QUESTIONS

*“So it depends not upon man’s will or exertion, but on God’s mercy.”*

Salvation is God’s work from start to finish.

### R O M A N S 9 : 1 6

**F**rom time to time I run across a certain brand of discouraged Christian. A bit angry, and surely frustrated. The kind of person who’s full of questions about What? and Why? And if they’ve grown up in a home or a church uncomfortable with difficult questions, after a while the replies of “We don’t question God,” or “Just believe the Bible,” don’t work anymore, and so they check out and check back in from time to time to see if anything’s changed and wonder, “Is there anyone who takes my questions seriously?”

And so, when I ask, “What are your big questions?” and take time to listen, you see them come alive. And while I’m sometimes surprised by a new spin, the most common are things like, “Why does God allow evil?” and “What about the people who’ve never heard?” and “Do miracles happen?” and “Where are the dinosaurs in the Bible?” and “Do my choices matters, or is everything decided ahead of time?” or “What is heaven like?” or “Why is there poverty?” and “Does God hear my prayers?” or, “Did Jesus really rise from the dead?” or “Will my dog be in heaven?” or, “Will there be sex in the world to come?” and sometimes even a spooky one like, “Are ghosts real?”

Life raises questions, and people are very interesting in the ones they ask. Behind each question is a bit of biography, and often some real pain or fear. People appreciate it when you take their questions seriously and help them

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 6**

towards satisfying answers, even if not necessary quick or easy ones.<sup>1</sup> Slogans rarely satisfy. Questions are pointers, and they're meant to be followed. Curiosity and conundrum are two ways God stirs our minds to seek him.

Part of God's grace in the church is the freedom to ask any question you wish, and when we tell people to stuff their questions and silence their thinking, it hurts us all because the questions do not simply go away; they're just taken elsewhere. You don't have to check your brain or your emotions or your history or your questions at the door of the church to be a follower of Jesus. It all comes in with you, and wise is the church that welcomes it all. And while our faith is about trust based on evidence and leading to commitment and understanding— and ultimately to worship and adoration— it's not about some sort of blind belief with no light and no rationality or inner coherence. As someone said, it's not a leap in the dark but a leap into the light.

That big gray computer between your ears is meant to be fully engaged and joined to your heart so that the whole of you is brought to bear. We are not after a part of the person, say a saved soul, but the whole of the person in all their capacities. You don't have to be an intellectual to be a Christian, but you must use all the intellect you have. Christianity is a comprehensive curriculum for the reshaping and remaking of the whole person, and in a sensate culture like ours that increasingly wants everything to be about *my feelings*, the church continues to make the counter-cultural appeal, "Come *think with us* about who God is revealed to be and why it matters for the whole of life."

Christian faith, if it is anything, is comprehensive— as are all the world's major religions, which why they've lasted. They each give different answers to the big questions: Where did it all come from? What wrong with our world? With me? Is there hope now and later, and how do I know? And on our read,

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<sup>1</sup> A good place to start is Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Colorado Springs, CO: Tyndale, 2010) or James Anderson, *Why Should I Believe Christianity?* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016). For a more advanced read, see Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers & Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2102).

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 7**

Christian salvation is not only about saving you as an individual but about God setting everything right again, now in preview and in part, then in a full cosmic display with Jesus at the center of it all. And that is an unavoidably comprehensive claim and not something to be hesitant about. The church in history will always be a mixed bag, and how could it be otherwise when it's made of folk like us? But our God, the one who showed up at ground level in Jesus, is not a mixed bag but true, and we invite any and all to come check out the evidence and the arguments and the testimonies, and we don't mind adding your questions and concerns to the mix. We've literally heard it all before, and with each new generation all the old questions are made fresh again.

Yes, there are mysteries that go beyond full comprehension, and before these we stand in awe and wait for more light, but the church has spent two thousand years answering questions in market places and university lecture halls, in homes and casual conversations, and over that time some of our best minds have been at work on the issues: philosophers and theologians, scientists and Bible scholars using the evidences of the faith to engage questions. Some even say that we are now in the *Golden Age of Apologetics*,<sup>2</sup> which is that branch of the Christian brain trust— and we have a quite impressive one— devoted to offering rational defenses of the faith and taking on opponents with respect and clarity. You may not like some of the answers, but there are thoughtful treatments if you take time to seek them out.<sup>3</sup> Smart believers have been working over these issues for a very long time, and we at least ought to respect their efforts. Along the way you will find your questions changing, as I often say, “I'm now confused at a much higher level!”

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

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<sup>2</sup> On the claim and the evidence, see Lee Strobel, “Lee Strobel: We're on Cusp of Golden Era of Apologetics,” [www.christianpost.com/news/lee-strobel-were-on-cusp-of-golden-era-of-apologetics-67654](http://www.christianpost.com/news/lee-strobel-were-on-cusp-of-golden-era-of-apologetics-67654).

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive apologetic, see Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011); also William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth And Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2008).

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 8**

Now what does all this have to do with Paul and Romans? Precisely this, that in the passage before us, Paul offers careful responses to several difficult questions that arise as he agonizes over why so few of his Jewish kinsmen see Jesus the Messiah as he does.<sup>4</sup> All the earliest Christians were Jews,<sup>5</sup> and while some continued all along to put their trust in Jesus as God's *Sent One*, it's not a flood but a trickle, and that's a problem since the Expected One has indeed already come. The church from the mid first century onwards is increasingly made of Gentile outsiders, due in part to Paul's own missionary labors, and time and again people ask, "Is God unjust to his own people? Has he forgotten them?" and— on another level— "If God pre-rigs everything by divine choice and election, does it make him a bully and us just a bunch of puppets?" "Why have God's select people with whom he's been working for so long not come over en masse? They've been given immense privileges in their history with the Lord, the greatest being that Jesus is one of them, an Israelite, a Jew, a kinsman! He lived among them in public.<sup>6</sup> What's going on? Why so little response?"

This fact hurts Paul at a heart level and gave him a pain in the brain, so he does his best to reason out a faithful answer, and for him that means drawing raw materials from the Jewish Scriptures, which for him had unique authority as a record of God's work. And his first move is to say that, while Abraham was called as the father of a new people, not all his biological descendants are part of the line of promise, but only the line through Isaac, the miracle child given to him and Sarah when her fertility was restored. And why is this? Because Ishmael was Abraham's attempt to help God out with Hagar as the incubator— as if God needed it— and that will not do.

What God is up to in this special history of creating a new people must rest on God's actions alone, not frail, misguided human strategies. And in the second generation the election and selection is again up to God and in violation

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<sup>4</sup> 9:1-3.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:1-21.

<sup>6</sup> 9:4-5.

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 9**

of cultural custom where the eldest always has priority.<sup>7</sup> Jacob the schemer and scoundrel— and not Esau— is one through whom the promises to Abraham are extended, not through Esau, though he receives blessings as well.

God alone chooses, God alone selects, God alone elects and preserves to ensure divine consistency and priority in the midst of messy human families where rivalries are rampant, even cutthroat. God is cutting a fresh road through the desert, bringing about a people who will bear his person and promises to the wider world and finally from whom will come the Jesus in whom God the Son is displayed in person. What God is after from his tribe of Jews, and finally from Gentiles like us, is not that we make some independent contribution of our own, whether of good ideas or clever schemes or moral performances according to the law or great promises of loyalty, because we simply can't pull it off.

And the reason is that we are just too disabled, too weak, too ignorant, too lost, too compromised, too blind, too vulnerable to evil and rebellion, too *sinful*— to use the broadest diagnostic term— and too helpless to make anything significant happen. We're not in good shape, and you only have to look around at the dark side of any culture to verify this diagnosis. Butchery, bad religion, using others as tools, centering ourselves in pleasure and power, striking all kinds of deals with the devil if only it goes well for us. We're not in any position to contribute anything to our being saved and restored to God, and that— to unredeemed human nature— is a big offense to pride. It always wants to have something to contribute or bargain with from its side of the ledger, some shred of accomplishment to cling to and wave in God's face as a bargaining chip. "It's really not as bad as you say, Lord, just look at what I've done." Hello?

This comprehensive and insightful diagnosis of the desperate human condition is referred to— in Protestant thinking at least— as the *Doctrine of Original Sin*, and part of the teaching is that there's nothing original about it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 9:10-13.

<sup>8</sup> United Methodist official teaching is found in our Articles of Religion, Article VII: Of Original or Birth Sin, "Original sin standeth not in the following of

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 10**

It's not new but old, and it effects everyone. It started— thus the root word *origin* in *original*— and it's never stopped its rolling devastation, generation by generation. And in the end we all die, and for beings made in God's image, death and the terror and pain of it, is un-natural; it's alien and it's universal because we are all in the same fix. And oddly enough, in recent years some outside our Christian circle see the value of our radical diagnosis. One, the philosopher Michael Ruse, has written:

"With respect to the main claims of Christianity... I am pretty atheistic .... I prefer the term 'skeptic' to describe my position .... I'm an ardent evolutionist .... I think that science is the highest form of knowledge; I am a philosophical naturalist."

And yet, surprisingly, Ruse also ardently defends the biblical doctrine of original sin and even argues for it in these words:

"I think Christianity is spot on about original sin. How could one think otherwise, when the world's most civilized and advanced people— the (German) people of Beethoven, Goethe, (and) Kant—embraced that slime-ball Hitler and participated in the Holocaust? I think Saint Paul and the great Christian philosophers had real insights into sin and freedom and responsibility, and I want to build on this rather than turn from it."<sup>9</sup>

So when God is working with this kind of utterly unreliable raw materials that misunderstand and resist him at every turn as if by reflex, if any progress is to be made, any new and hopeful thing develop, then guess who has to make the choices and initiate the plans? God and God alone must choose and carry

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Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, *whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually*" (ital. ad, *The U.M. Book of Discipline* 2102: 65).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., editors, *God and Evil* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP Books, 2013), 126.

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 11**

through the promises. And all God wants, as made perfectly clear in Jesus Christ, is to win our trust, for us to say, “I’m risking all I am on you and your reliability.” Now this faith does not materially contribute anything new, but it is an open door, a surrender, a desire to stop saying No and start saying Yes, and even the slightest desire to do this is a sign God’s grace is already at work within the soul, plowing it and seeding it with the possibility of new life. If it’s going to Be, it’s not up to me; if it’s going to be, it’s up to God. And that is Paul’s deep conviction as he traces the ways of God from Abraham down to his day, and this insight he calls *election* or *selection*, God’s sovereign choosing. That is the only reliable ground for our being rescued and saved, not what we do, but what God does for us and in which we are invited to trust.

Now one of the questions that arises from people like us when faced with the teaching of election is that God is fickle, arbitrary, and unfair, even unjust and wicked to choose as he does. And the question Paul was asked a hundred times is this, “Is there injustice on God’s part?” to which his answer is a firm, “By no means.” Because if I’m lost and helpless and God is not good, there’s no hope for me or the world. If God is engaged in and enjoys wickedness, then God is not God but the devil, and that thought horrifies Paul. There’s no evil in God, no balancing forces of dark and light, nothing but one thing, and that is holy love, loves that desires the wholeness and perfection of the beloved.

One of the things I most admire about Paul is that while he’s a creative thinker, he’s not an independent thinker. He has no independent base of truth but only Scripture, the life of Jesus, and his experience of the same, and from these he reasons and builds his case, and so he returns to his Bible again and again, not to give a quick proof text but to evoke an entire story.

If I say, “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” you think *Declaration of Independence*; and if I say “We the people,” you think *Constitution*, and when Paul quotes God saying to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion,” they thought of the ugly scene of the Golden Calf and its resolution in the tent of meeting between their man Moses and Yahweh the Lord.

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 12**

The people sinned wickedly while Moses was up on the mountain with God; everyone chipped in their gold, and an idol was crafted with Aaron’s help, a God they could see and hopefully control. The immediate justice when Moses descends is that three thousand idolatrous men are slain; this is followed by a plague, and the next day Moses goes out of the camp to the tent of meeting to negotiate their uncertain future. And while he’s there reminding God of his people and offering himself, he makes an unusual personal request, that he may see God’s glory, that the veil may be lifted off the divine. But since none can see God’s face and live, Moses is hidden in a cleft in the rock and shielded by the divine hand as God passes by so that Moses catches a glimpse from behind, and as this happens the Lord testifies of himself, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”<sup>10</sup>

This does not mean that God is kind to one and arbitrarily harsh to another. No, it means that God’s character and choice have not changed, even in spite of his people’s treason. God still chooses to show his people grace and mercy. This is what election means; this is what God’s choosing the Jews means; that judgment is real, but God will not cease to show mercy. How else could he keep and sustain such a difficult people? “So, says Paul in the summary of verse 16, “it depends not upon man’s will or exertion, but upon God’s mercy.” Mercy is grounded not in my merit or worth but in God’s free and deliberate choice; it rests on the divine character. And in the second example of Pharaoh, even his cruelty and resistance cannot stop God’s use of him, “*I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed to all the earth.*” God’s initiative and his ability to enact its ends is not frustrated by evil persons; God uses them in spite of themselves. So this is the Apostle’s answer to the first question, “Is there injustice on God’s part?” No, but there is mercy abundant because God so chooses to be unreasonably merciful with his own.

“OK,” the questioner continues, “but if God has such power and runs everything, how can he possibly blame us for our faults since it appears he allowed, even caused, them? Who can resist that kind of all-encompassing

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<sup>10</sup> See Exodus 32-33 for the full story.

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planning and power? Is God's will the only one with potency? Are we nothings and kidding ourselves that our decisions matter? Is all determined beforehand?"

It's a clever tactic, but what it misses is the relational side of things. God is not a bully, and between now and the end, meets all kinds of resistance from other wills who do not want to cooperate, both human and angelic, within his own people and outside. And Paul's answer is interesting, because it begins with reframing the proper relationship between the Creator and Creature. Now when we accuse God of having bad character and of being a bully, we set the scene of God being in the witness stand with us as the prosecuting attorney. But this never happens, because God is not another creature in our world but the One who stands outside it with total and complete comprehension, thus verse 20, "But who are you, oh (little) man, to argue back to God?"

Just last May an Israeli man petitioned for a restraining order against God. The plaintiff, Mr. David Shoshan, represented himself at a hearing in Haifa. The record noted God was not present to defend himself.

Mr. Shoshan told the court God had been treating him "harshly and not nicely"—though no details were given. He explained he'd made several attempts to contact police to report God's crimes, and that patrol cars came to his house on 10 occasions. Police advised Shoshan—my guess is with a wry smile—to take out a restraining order. The request was denied by Judge Ahsan Canaan, who said the request was "delusional" and that the petitioner needed help from sources outside the court, and how right he was!<sup>11</sup>

In the end we do not have *the maker's knowledge*, only our own, and it is so limited. And to attempt to blame God for our moral failings and their consequences as if God is a powerful bully is folly. The protest "Why have you made me thus?" puts the burden on the wrong player. And here the image of God the potter from Jeremiah is brought to bear. The analogy works for several reasons, the first being that God is Creator, and we the work of his hands. Under

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<sup>11</sup> Elsa Vulliamy, "Man seeks restraining order against God," *Independent* (5-6-16), [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/man-restraining-order-god-a7016791](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/man-restraining-order-god-a7016791).

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his skill and selective pressures we are shaped. But here the likeness breaks down. We are not blobs of passive clay but active agents, fully able and willing to push back against the Potter's shaping power and in the process find ourselves distorted, or— as Paul put it— *as vessels of wrath made for destruction*, not by God's arbitrary decision to warp us but by our resistance to his gracious hand. To put God in the dock and blame him for my failings is to show myself a fool, and such is the multi-level distortion of our current condition.

And while God is patient and puts up with such foolishness, another set of vessels are being simultaneously turned and fashioned on the potter's wheel, the vessels of mercy, the ones responsive and yielding to the Craftsman's sure touch, whether Jew or Gentile, insider or outsider. And of the Gentiles Hosea hinted when he wrote that those who were in times past not God's people *I will call my people*, and that from within old Israel a remnant and a seed will be preserved. God's people are Jew and Gentile gathered around Jesus Christ.

Yes, you can resist God's will as a free, accountable agent, but it will only distort you and in the end demonstrate over time what you have become, an ugly thing, a human distortion, a vessel fit to be smashed. God's free election is that those who respond to his mercy will have a glorious future, and that those who stay with some other scheme of self-salvation will not, and— on a day we cannot predict— “the Lord will execute his sentence upon the earth with rigor and dispatch.” God will have a faithful people, and it will contain his first people and his second people, Jews and Gentiles.

This is what God is up to in the long, tortured trek of Israel and the Church, and if it was up to us, it would never be, but since it's up to God, it's sure to be. And so the question is not, Will it be? but, Will I be there? Will I be found among God's people when the end comes suddenly? If my trust is in Jesus Christ, who he is and what he's done, then Yes. But if my reliance is on myself, my supposed moral performance, my good intentions, my ability to impress God apart from his Son, then No; there is no place for me, and the smashing of vessels will begin.

Paul's first pair of *What?* and *Why?* questions is the longer, and the second

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**Romans 9:14-33. . . . . 15**

set in verses 30 through 33 the shorter. *What shall we say then?* And the answer is a paradox. The Gentiles, who did not have Jewish privilege and who did not seek to keep the law, are now in right relationship with God because of one thing— their trust in Jesus Christ. And that most of the Jews who had the law and saw it as something which— if strictly kept— made them right with God, have missed out because they substituted something else for the one think that mattered, and it was not their performance or moral excellence; it was trusting what God did for them in Jesus Christ. At Jesus Christ, because he came not as they expected and died in such a shameful fashion, they stumbled. He can't be the one, but others were convinced and found new life.

There are two powerful forces in the world, and they are trust and love. To the world they look weak, but we know differently. Divine love reaches out in Jesus, and when our hand reaches back in trust, an amazing thing happens; we find a new home.

