

Romans (9:19-29)

Lumps of Clay

Part 42 - July 17, 2005

REDEMPTION HISTORY

Last week we saw how God used Egypt as an *incubator* to separate Israel, while developing her into a nation of 3,000,000 plus. Then God hardened Pharaoh so he would push every last Israelite out of Egypt, so God could get them to Mount Sinai. This is where God gave them (and us) the first five books of the Bible, and it's where he defined them as his chosen people.

Q: But, chosen for what?

A: Let's go back to God's very first covenant with Abraham:

The Lord had said to Abram ... "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." - Genesis 12:1-3 NIV

God chose to bless the Jews, so that ultimately they could be a blessing to the *world*. This is where the Promised Land comes in.

Q: Do you know what was so special about the *Promised Land*, and why it was so important for God to get them there?

A: The Promised Land was Palestine (Israel). It intersected ancient trade routes and was the crossroads of the world. The Jews were called to evangelize the Gentiles

But they failed miserably. First they slid back into paganism, and to get their attention back on him, God allowed the Babylonians to destroy the temple and take the Jews captive. But, they overreacted and separated themselves to the point of cutting themselves off from the world; they became *exclusive*.

In Romans, chapter nine, Paul so far has said: Their *nation* is cursed and cut off from Christ. (9:3) Only a remnant of true Jews has chosen rightly. (9:8) God has hardened their hearts for his purposes. (9:18)

THE POTTER & THE CLAY

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him 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 noble purposes and some for common use? - Romans 9:19-21 NIV

This question is in regard to God “hardening the hearts of the nation of Israel”; it’s *not* about personal salvation.

Paul doesn’t condemn the *question*; he condemns the attitude that prompts it. He doesn’t say “who are you to *humbly question*.” He says: “who are you ... to talk back” (e.g. criticize, argue).

Paul was used to dealing with Jews who were more interested in attacking his point (and his person 2 Cor 11:23-27), than examining the OT scriptures for God’s revelation. And sure enough, this is the context of Paul’s OT quote:

“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?’ – Isaiah 45:9 NIV

This quarrelsome attitude is wrong for two big reasons:

1. It puts the *created* in judgment over its *creator*.
2. It calls into question the justness the designer.

Is God unjust? Not at all! – Romans 9:14 NIV

- God’s sovereignty is *always* expressed righteously.

And the point Paul is making – in the context of this passage – is *not* that God’s “sculpting” is arbitrary, but that as creator he alone has the right to form and figure however he sees fit. Therefore, God can choose whoever he wills (even “common” ol’ Gentiles). “Common use” means, *not* distinctive or distinguished, but relegated to being *ordinary*.

The Jews had a *noble role* in God’s redemptive history. And they should’ve been *thrilled* that God’s prophecy to Abraham was being fulfilled in their lifetime, through a Jesus ... a Jew! Instead they felt threatened: if *common* Gentiles are now on the same spiritual footing, their noble, chosen status was gone.

GETTING UN-HARDENED

Q: But, can *we* humbly ask how God can blame someone for resisting his will, if he’s the one who hardens them in the first place?

A: Of course ... it’s a great question! (There’re scriptures that say God *blinds* people, *deafens* people, and *dulls* their minds.) God made truth *unappealing* to the self-important.

God chose the foolish things ... to shame the wise ... the weak things ... to shame the strong ... the lowly ... and the despised things ... so that no one may boast ...
– 1 Cor 1:27-31 NIV

This is why salvation must begin with God’s (wake-up) call (a humble revelation of *my* need and *his* provision), and my cry for help – for his mercy and grace. And, cry out to the Lord and it doesn’t matter how blind, deaf, dumb, or hardened you were. It’s all removed through Christ.

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. – 2 Corinthians 3:14 NIV

Everything is backward when viewed through a selfish lens: To be liberated, I need to *surrender*? To be wealthy, I must *give* things away? To be significant, I must *serve* others? And so, God has no trouble hiding his truth in plain sight; it's simply disguised as "foolishness" to self-serving hearts. Jesus reflects this "foolishness" in many of his miracles:

... the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied ... – John 9:15 NIV

Here, Jesus desires to restore sight AND to do it in a way (backward to logic) that requires simple trust in him. We can't see, hear, or know truth till we trust.

What if God, 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? - Romans 9:22-24 NIV

This is a very strong warning to the Jews who rejected Jesus. And it's a classic error in the calm before the consequences: Don't misinterpret God's patience for his favor. The hostile Jews Paul confronted would've gestured to the temple and said, "What's changed? Everything is as it always has been." They had no idea that they were just 13 years from the temple being destroyed (by the Romans) as Jesus had predicted. (*Mat 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6*)

We must make no mistake; those outside of Christ are objects of God's wrath, those through faith in Jesus are objects of mercy.

Some see that phrase "prepared for destruction" and read into it that God "programs" some souls to be *un-savable*. But if so, God wouldn't need "patience" to put up with them. Patience is the calm endurance of provocation or frustration. If the wrath-deserving behavior was the conception and creation of God, it wouldn't provoke or frustrate him any more than a well written villain would provoke a great writer.

- God's *Preparation* does not include "hacking" into the soul.

And when he talks about God's "objects of mercy", it's clear that both "Jews" and "Gentiles" were "prepared in advance". The salvation of Gentiles was not an afterthought; as Paul now demonstrates with four more OT quotes:

As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" - Romans 9:25-26 NIV

Both quotes from Hosea (2:23; 1:10) refer to God restoring Israel after abandoning her to rebellion. If God is in the business of making "sons" out of people who are *not* his people ... wouldn't Gentiles qualify?

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah." – Romans 9:27-29 NIV

Paul's point that only a remnant of true Jews has chosen rightly is backed up by Isaiah's prophecy.

And Paul must take some satisfaction in reminding God's *chosen people* (of which he's one) that they've had national moments of rebelliousness that rivaled and surpassed many Gentile nations.

WHY THE JEWS REJECTED JESUS

I was driving to Bellingham, thinking about how the hardening of the Jews might fit into God's sovereign plan.

Paul told us why God hardened Pharaoh's heart:

... that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." – Romans 9:17 NIV

And I thought maybe it's the same for the Jews; maybe if they'd accepted Jesus as Messiah he would've remained too exclusive.

Anyway, I got to this little café to do some writing, and the tables were full, so they gave me a pager and sent me into an attached book store. I walked to the first shelf ... to this book.

It's called: *Why The Jews Rejected Jesus*. And it's written by a very eloquent Jewish man (David Klinghoffer) ... who has rejected Jesus. I turned it over and read this on the back cover:

David Klinghoffer reaches the remarkable conclusion that had Jesus been embraced as the promised Jewish messiah, Christianity might have remained an entirely Jewish movement and Western civilization, as we know it, would not have happened. – Dust Jacket

Judaism per se was never designed to be a mass religion ... A "Jewish" Christianity would have stood as much chance of taking hold of huge numbers of people as a church nowadays that asks all members to earn a master's degree in theology. – pg. 8

If you value the great achievements of Western civilization and of American society, thank the Jews for their decision to cleave to their ancestral religion instead of embracing the rival teachings of Jesus and his followers. – pg. 9

Even the apostles had to be shaken out of a mindset that Christ was theirs' alone (e.g. Peter, James). And Paul says outright that the Jews' rejection *pushed* him to the Gentiles. (Acts 13:46)

Just as Pharaoh's hardened heart pushed God's people out into the world, perhaps the hardened hearts of the Jews allowed the Lord's gospel to do the same.

- Turns out, that potter really knows what he's sculpting!