

The Potter and The Clay

Examining Romans 9:10-24

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1895 BC

It was early in the afternoon. A young wife was at home in her tent preparing a meal for her husband. As she stirred the lentil pottage, she suddenly stood up and wrapped her hands protectively around her growing stomach. She bent forward slightly and pain reflected in her soft dark eyes. The movements of the baby were so strong that she could bear it no longer. When the movements settled down enough so that she could straighten up, she went to inquire of the Lord.

“Why am I having so much trouble?” she asked.

The Lord answered and said, “Two nations are in your womb, and two kinds of people will be born from you. One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”<sup>1</sup>

“I’m having twins!” she said to herself with a smile. The young mother wondered about the Lord’s words, but took strength and comfort from them and went back to her tent. She continued her daily chores, and whenever the babies would struggle and fight within her, she would smile and endure the pain, remembering the Word of the Lord.

It wasn’t long after that the time to give birth was upon her. With the help of the midwife, she indeed gave birth to twins. The first one was red, and quite hairy, so they named him Esau. His brother came out almost immediately afterward, grabbing hold of Esau’s heel, so they named him Jacob, which means heel-catcher.<sup>2</sup> The new mother looked up and smiled at her husband who was gazing at his wife in amazement and admiration.

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As we begin with Romans 9:10-12, we see that God told Rebekah, who was carrying twins, that the elder of the two was going to be subservient to his younger brother.

***Ro 9:10-12** Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad-- in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls-- she was told, "The older will serve the younger."³*

Rebekah was told before her twins were even born that the firstborn twin would grow up in servitude toward his younger brother. Now in those days, it was tradition for the firstborn to inherit everything. But God isn’t bound by tradition, so when the boys grew up, the younger of the two received all of the blessings instead of his brother.

¹ Ge 25:23 And the LORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger." (NKJV)

² Ge 25:24 So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb.

25 And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau.

26 Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. (NKJV)

³ Scripture is from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

Let's go back to Genesis 25:23 where we find the original prophecy.

Genesis 25:23 *And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. (KJV)*

The Lord had a plan to build two strong nations and the father of those nations were Jacob and Esau. Jacob was called Israel and fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. Esau took a wife from the daughters of Ishmael and became the father of the Edomites, as we see in Genesis chapter 36. It was decreed, before they were even born, that these two children would be two nations, and that one nation would serve the other so that the purpose of God according to election might stand.

Now we ask, "Why did the Lord choose Jacob?"

The Lord answers this question through the prophets Malachi and Isaiah in the following passages:

Mal 1:2-3 *"I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."*

Isa 41:8-9 *"But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you."*

The Lord clearly shows that He has chosen Jacob over Esau before the two were even born for His own purpose. The same goes for all of His creation. We do not choose God, He chooses us! We are elected, chosen from the foundations of the earth, as it says in Ephesians:

Eph 1:4-6 *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*

Eph 1:11-12 *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

But let us continue with our passage in Romans:

Ro 9:13-16 *Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."⁴ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.*

Not only does the Lord choose Jacob over Esau, but He even states that he loved Jacob and hated Esau. Paul asks the question that we all have, "Is God unrighteous?" Of course not! As it says here in verses 15 and 16, we really have no right at all to speak against God or to call Him unrighteous. He is the Creator and He has every right to decide whom He will have mercy on.

⁴ Compare with **Ex 33:19**: And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

Continuing on in Romans, Paul again refers to the Old Testament pointing out that God also chooses to raise Pharaoh only to show His power:

Ro 9:17 *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."*

Exodus 9:16 *And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth. (KJV)*

Exodus 10:1 ¶ *And the LORD said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh: for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might shew these my signs before him: (KJV)*

Exodus 14:17 *And I, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall follow them: and I will get me honour upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen. (KJV)ⁱ*

Proverbs 16:4 ¶ *The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.⁵ (KJV)*

We see in these few verses that Pharaoh was only raised to show the power of God, which was demonstrated in the plagues that He sent to Egypt, and that the wicked were only created for a specific purpose, the day of evil. It also continues with the certainty that it is God's decision whom He will have mercy on, as we see in verse 18:

Ro 9:18 *Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.*

However, we as humans have difficulty believing such a statement because we want to be in control of our own lives. After all, we are not puppets! Paul understands our concerns, but he continues with some very serious questions, the same questions that have been asked throughout history, that we must ask ourselves:

Ro 9:19 *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"*

Paul echoes what the Old Testament says, that God does what He does for *His own purpose*, and no one can contest Him. Here we have Jehoshaphat, Job and Nebuchadnezzar all saying the same thing:

2Ch 20:5-6 *Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD in the front of the new courtyard and said: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you.*

Job 9:11-12 *When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him. If he snatches away, who can stop him? Who can say to him, 'What are you doing?'*

Job 23:13 *"But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases.*

Da 4:34-35 ¶ *And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?" (NKJV)*

⁵ Emphasis mine.

So the question remains. Who are *we* to dispute God? Just the fact that He *is* God should be enough.

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2007 AD

John entered the large room and flipped on the switch. Florescent light flooded the room and he squinted slightly as he headed toward the shelves along the back wall. Opening one of the plastic bags, he scooped out about three pounds of red clay and brought it to one of the tables. After forming the mass into a ball, he threw it with a satisfying *thwump* onto the center of a pottery wheel sitting on the table. Starting the wheel at a slow spin, John patted down the clay, forcing it to the center making it easier to pull. As the wheel turned, he molded it into a cone shape and continued to push the clay to the correct position. Once he was satisfied that the lump was as close to the center as he could get it, he wet both his hands and the clay and turned up the speed. Pressing in on the wet clay, he felt it grow taller and more cylindrical. Then with his left hand as a guide, he used his right to push the clay down, ready to be opened up.

Using his thumb like a drill press, his other hand as the guide, he slowly pushed straight down into the clay, then using both of his hands, he widened the opening. Once that was done, he reached his thumb into the bowl and pinched the sides as he pulled upward, his other hand helping to keep him steady. He had his share of flopped bowls in the past, and knew how important it was to keep his hands as still as possible. So far, and he grinned at the well-worn pun, this project was really starting to take shape. Repeating the process a few times, he was now satisfied with the thickness and began shaping the piece. After he trimmed some of the base down, he gently squeezed the neck then pulled out on the lip. It was finally starting to look like a vase and he smiled. He stopped the wheel, and using a fishing line he cut the base and brought the vase to another shelf to dry out. Once dry, he would be able to trim out the foot and smooth it out before sending it to the kiln.

On the other side of town, as John was getting ready to start on another vase, Matt was sitting at a long bench. He had just finished wiping down the seams he had trimmed from a pot he was about to glaze and set the damp sponge on the table. He chuckled to himself as he grabbed a brush and opened a jar of antique blue glaze, a satiny glaze with gold flecks that his mother picked for the outside of the container. As he applied the first coat to the green-ware, he wondered why his mother would want to give his grandmother such a thing. Surely she doesn't use them anymore? Chamber pots were only used when they didn't want to go to the outhouse, and last time he checked, the indoor plumbing was working just fine. He shrugged and continued with his chore. But it wasn't *really* a chore. Matt had been painting ceramics since he was a child and loved to create beautiful pieces of pottery. His most favorite was the bowl and pitcher that he gave to his mother on Mother's Day of last year. For today's job he offered to make a similar set for his grandmother, but she was adamant about what she wanted and a chamber pot it was. He would at least try to make it look pretty.

Two young men on opposite sides of town, both using clay of one type or another, and both making containers of one type or another. John's container ends up in a young couple's house and often holds bouquets of flowers, most likely peach colored roses, which are the young wife's favorite. Matt's container ends up in his grandmother's dressing room, and although she doesn't use it for what it was originally used for, she appreciates it for her own particular (and often peculiar) reasons.

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In this scenario, in neither case did the containers brag, boast, whine or complain about why they were made. But let's say for the sake of argument that they did. Let's say the vase was allergic to roses and would rather have had John to make it into a cereal bowl instead. And what about Matt's chamber pot? What would Matt say if that piece of ceramic started whining while it was being glazed? Do you think

Matt would care? I think Matt would give up his midnight snacks of peanut butter and bananas, but other than that, why would he listen...why should he? What about the potters a hundred years ago, whose chamber pots actually *were* used for the job they were intended? But be that as it may, each potter had his own reason for the design of his own portion of clay. And don't they have the right to do just that?

It doesn't matter what the clay wants, but what the potter wants. It's the potter's desire to form the clay into whatever is his design. The clay itself has no say in it whatsoever, nor can it say anything even if it wanted to.

But now we must ask, why does the bible point these things out to us? The Lord explains the answer to Jeremiah:

Jer 18:1-6 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "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.

God is telling Israel that He has the same rights as the potter, forming the clay as it seems best to Him. After all, isn't God the Creator? In the beginning, everything was made by Him and for Him, and he breathed the breath of life into the man formed from the dust of the ground, and he became a living being.⁶ God is the Potter, and because we were created by Him, we are the clay to do with as He pleases. Now before you get angry, let's read all of the questions that Paul asks the Romans.

Ro 9:20 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?'"

Paul is repeating the same questions that were asked by the Prophets. Here Job and Isaiah give us examples of why we should NOT question God, because *He* is the Creator and we are *His* creation:

Job 33:13 Why do you fight against Him? For He does not give account for any of His matters. (MKJV)

Isa 29:16 O your perversity! Shall the former be counted as the potter's clay; for shall the work say of him who made it, He did not make me? Or shall the thing formed say to him who formed it, He had no understanding? (MKJV)

Isa 45:9 Woe to him who fights with the One who formed him, a potsherd among the potsherds of the earth! Shall the clay say to its former, What are you making? Or your work, He has no hands? (MKJV)

Isa 64:8 But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our Former; and we all are the work of Your hand. (MKJV)

I have often wondered what it was with Romans 9:10-24 that gives us so much trouble. I soon realized that it is because it gives God total control and for some reason, the human race in our earthly nature doesn't like this. But the bible plainly states that God is the Creator and we are the creation and we have no right to tell the Creator what to do with his creation.

⁶ Gen. 2:7

Paul continues with his questions:

Ro 9:21 *Or has not the potter authority over the clay, out of the same lump to make one vessel to honour, and another to dishonour? (DBY)*

Who says the potter can't make a beautiful clay vase and fill it with colorful fragrant flowers, and from the same lump of clay make an ashtray or a spittoon, or even clay 'pigeons' whose sole purpose is to be shot out of the sky into hundreds of small bits in a successful skeet shoot?

Compare this with what Paul says to Timothy:

2Timothy 2:20 *But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. (KJV)*

So we see that it is very common to have a house full of things both lovely and plain. We all have things like these, so why can't God?

Paul then asks a final important question:

Ro 9:22-24 *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?*

In this question, Paul is showing us that the Creator chose to show His power and wrath upon those who were created for destruction so that we who love Him⁷, the objects of His mercy whom He prepared in advance for glory, might know the riches of His glory. How would we know how merciful our God is unless we see His great wrath? And we don't need to worry about His wrath because:

Ro 8:28-31 *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God⁸, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*

29 ¶ For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

30 Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

31 ¶ What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? (KJV)

God is omnipotent. He is the Creator. He created everything for *His* purpose, not ours. Some are created to show His mighty wrath and some are created to show His loving mercy. If we love Him, we have nothing to worry about, because if God is for us, who can be against us?

⁷ 1Jo 4:19 We love him, because he first loved us. (KJV)

⁸ Emphasis mine.

ⁱ Other examples of the Lord hardening the hearts of men:

Ex 9:12 And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had spoken unto Moses.

Ex 10:1 ¶ And the LORD said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh: for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might shew these my signs before him:

Ex 10:20 But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the children of Israel go.

Ex 10:27 But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.

Ex 14:8 And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued after the children of Israel: and the children of Israel went out with an high hand.

De 2:30 But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him: for the LORD thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand, as [appeareth] this day.

Jer 19:15 Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring upon this city and upon all her towns all the evil that I have pronounced against it, because they have hardened their necks, that they might not hear my words.