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Romans 9:22–24, ESV.

*²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—
²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?*

Even us whom he has called.

We're doing to look at a chapter of Romans that in places is difficult to parse, and in general can be very difficult to interpret. If understood properly, it focuses us as people of faith by telling us about serving God on Earth and our ability to choose to follow Christ. But historically, it has been misinterpreted. Chapter 9 of Romans demands a careful analysis by the modern reader. It does not say what many over the centuries have thought it says. Taking a fresh look at it can free us to fully live out a faith that is rooted in joy rather than living out a mechanical, fatalistic faith.

First, though, I'd like to describe a conversation I had with someone quite recently. She was facing a major surgery, and she had asked a neighbor of hers who is a pastor to visit. But he had COVID, and so he asked me to visit this woman the morning before her procedure. We'll call her Jane. Jane is a very active person

who was in very good health, but probably due to genetic issues, she had developed cardiovascular problems, and at a relatively young age, she needed multiple bypass surgery. I knocked on her door and her husband let me in. I sat with her in her living room. It was a smallish house, but very elegant. She explained that they had decided on quality over quantity when it came to their house. Just a thousand square feet, but with beautiful wood floors, cherry cabinets, and granite counters in the kitchen and the bathrooms. Then she said that she was very nervous. I told her that I didn't blame her, that open heart surgery is a big deal, but that the procedure she was going to have done is very common and has a very high success rate. She smiled and said that she had realized a few days before that she wasn't nervous about the surgery itself. She had known for years that this was coming. Jane said that it was her faith that was making her nervous, or more precisely, her long standing lack of faith. It was because she suddenly felt like a hypocrite. Jane told me that she hadn't been in a church in many years, but that when confronted with heart surgery, she found herself praying fervently to God. She told me that she wasn't so sure that she "believed". It was her turning to God at a difficult moment that bothered her. She felt like a coward who couldn't live up to her beliefs and didn't know what to think or do about it. Jane said that she had lost her faith gradually as a young woman, but the final straw came one Sunday long ago

when the pastor of her church gave a sermon declaring that if you were a Christian “believer”, you were *doubly* saved. The Jews, he declared, had killed Jesus, and had denied their Messiah. They had given up their place as the Chosen People and surrendered it to the followers of Christ the Messiah. So, Christians were now the ones who would spend eternity with God. And, since each Christian believer has faith because God decided before they were created that they would indeed believe in God and Christ, they are individually saved. They will spend eternity with God. This is because of predeterminism, this preacher had said. God decided before time began that everyone in that church would one day follow the Christ the Jews had abandoned and thus end up in Heaven. You can’t control whether you will end up a believer, he reinforced. God creates you either to believe or to not believe, and in the second case, you are condemned to go to Hell. This was horrible, she had decided at that moment. It was arrogant, thinking that God loved Christians more than Jews, and that she was supposed to believe that God had decided before she was born that she was more important than others, more worthy of going to Heaven when she died. She didn’t remember his logic, exactly how he related his major points to the Bible, but she did remember that it was all based on Chapter 9 of Paul’s letter to the Romans. I told her that her pastor had badly misinterpreted the Bible. I then told her what I think Romans 9 says.

Let's look at the Bible. Paul's letter to the Romans is his longest and most widely read letter, and it is certainly his most impactful letter. It is the basis for much of Christian theology. Famous theologians and religious leaders like John Wesley and Augustine of Hippo had their lives radically altered by reading it and becoming inspired to dedicate their lives to God. What we believe is of course rooted in the Gospels, in the story of Jesus and what he preached, but our beliefs are also very heavily dependent on the interpretation of Jesus' words, as presented by the great Evangelist and author of much of the New Testament, Paul. Because of its complexity and length, and its conceptual breadth and depth, this letter has led to a lot of debate about just what we believe as believers. Chapter 9 opens with Paul expressing a deep sense of anguish at his fellow Jews for having concluded that Jesus is not the Messiah, that they would not follow him. He feels so terrible about this that he says: *"For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.* People read this passage this way. Paul's people are the People of God, and he would rather see himself condemned for all eternity than to think of his people not accepting Jesus. But herein lies a clue as to why this chapter is often misunderstood. Notice that he says, *"I could wish that I*

myself were accursed and cut off from Christ". To be accursed and cut off from Jesus does not mean that he would not be saved or that he would be cast into Hell. He means that he would rather be the one who is separated from Jesus, who does not take part in the Christian community, who does not serve God here on Earth while he is alive. He goes on to say, *"To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."* He's noting that the Jews are blessed by God, and that Christ, meaning the Messiah, was born a Jew. God maintaining a love for the Jewish people is critical. We will return to this notion of differentiating salvation from serving God.

Now, Paul addresses an issue that was probably a topic of discussion among Gentile and Jewish Christians of his day: If the Jews were the Chosen People, if God had first come to them, but most Jews rejected the Messiah, did God somehow fail? Did God's mission on Earth not fully succeed? Paul says this: *⁶But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.* In other words, not all those descended from Jewish lines were bound to follow Jesus. He then goes on to paraphrase a passage from Exodus, where God is addressing Moses: *"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* ¹⁶*So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but*

on God, who has mercy. Paul is saying that even as far back as the beginning of the Israelite's history, God knew that accepting God, accepting Christ the Messiah would depend not on where the individual comes from, but on their relationship with God. There is also something that has led to a serious misconception about Christianity over the centuries. You might read this as saying that since God will have mercy on whom he has mercy, God therefore has chosen in advance, before time began, who will be saved. This is called Predestination, and Calvinists, the followers of John Calvin, have always believed this. But Paul is not talking about God choosing in advance. Paul means that God is willing to have mercy on anyone, if they choose to have a relationship with God and his son, Jesus. This isn't about predestination. It's about the ability of any human, not just Jews, to follow Jesus. We have control over our relationship with God. It is not decided for us.

Paul continues with this: ²¹ *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?*

²² *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?* Many people have read this as further proof that Chapter

9 of Romans argues for predestination. You might think superficially that this says that God deliberately has handcrafted two kinds of people in advance, ones that will honor God and ones that will only dishonor God. But here is what this truly says: God is fully capable, when necessary, to show his wrath and make his power over evil known. But God is not hasty. Rather, he patiently endures so that he can show individuals – and importantly, we mean individual people, not entire ethnic groups – his mercy and grace. His hope is that each of us chooses to become a vessel of glory. God has had this as a goal since before the beginning of time for all people - Jews and Gentiles alike. God does not hold specific individuals nor specific groups as good or evil in advance. It says: *“²⁴ even us whom he has called.”* He doesn’t prefer one person over another, and he does not prefer one ethnic group over another. But God does recognize that some vessels will be used in a good way and others will be used in an evil fashion. There is something else very important here. Note that this is about the difference between putting humans to *“honorable use”* or *“dishonorable use”*. A major misconception is that this chapter is about salvation, about going to Heaven. It’s about serving God here on Earth. It’s about what we do with our lives, not what happens to us when our lives are over.

Here is the end of Chapter 9: *³⁰ What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by*

faith; ³¹ *but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.* ³² *Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,* ³³ *as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”* This ends with a reference to Isaiah, a passage which many read as a prediction of the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus. It says that Jesus will cause evil people to stumble and those true to God to be lifted up. People have read this passage in Romans, though, as saying that there is a group form of predestination, whereby God engineered the Jews to try to find salvation through works, and he chose the followers of Jesus, who were almost entirely Gentiles, to do the right thing by basing their relationship with God on faith. What this truly says is that all people, Jews or Gentiles, must come to God through faith, not works.

Remember the passage we looked at earlier, where we noted that Paul was so heartbroken at his fellow Jews rejecting the Messiah that he wishes he was the one who is not serving God. Remember that this passage is not about salvation. There are two major misconceptions about Chapter 9 of Romans. First, the chapter isn't about being saved for all of eternity, about the Christian notion of eternal redemption. It's about differentiating between people who choose voluntarily to

serve God from those who personally choose to not serve God. Second, this chapter isn't about predestination, about the predetermined eternal salvation of either individuals or entire ethnic groups. It's about God embracing anyone who does chooses out of their own free will to follow Jesus and thus serve God.

Jane's surgery apparently went fine. Her pastor neighbor told me this. They did a quadruple bypass, he thought, and she was in a good mood and optimistic afterwards. But you might be wondering what she thought about my analysis of Chapter 9 of Romans. The truth is that I don't know. She said to me that she found what I said interesting, that she would read Romans 9 for herself, during her extended recovery period. She did tell her pastor friend, though, after the surgery, that just before the doctor put her under for her surgery she felt the presence of God – and she knew that everything would be okay. When she woke up in Recovery, and she was told that the surgery had been completely successful, and that there had been no complications, she apparently joked with the nurse that she knew it would go fine, because the outcome had been predetermined by God.

I didn't engineer this message today because I thought that you all believe in predestination or that you think God loves one ethnic group more than another. But I do think that there is a preoccupation with salvation by faith and with salvation in general. As Christians we've been told that we have a special place in

God's hierarchy, simply because someone introduced us to Christ at some point, and we went on to be believers. It is a huge mistake to dismiss the incredible importance of what we do now on this planet simply because this life is temporarily. The Bible is about hope and joy and love. We should love and serve God and we should love and serve all people. We should live in joy because of our closeness to God. And because of our faith, we have hope that one day all things will be put right. Evil will be crushed. Goodness will prevail. And yes, this will last for all of eternity. However, the main story of the Bible is that we have a life with God right now. It is important what we do on this planet. God may have known in advance that we would believe as individuals, but it is still up to us, using our free will, to believe or not believe, and very importantly, to turn to Scripture, prayer, and the guidance of God to decide what to do each day of our lives. The Bible does not set us free as believers and tell us that we are saved and free to do what we want. As Jane pointed out, if we think we are Christians, we must live like Christians, not hypocrites. Please pray with me.

God, we know that you are the creator of all that is good and that we are the creator of all that is evil. We ask you to watch over us, and when we are about to live in a fashion that dishonors you, you fill us with so much grace that we cannot do anything other than return to you. Amen.