



Group Discussion Guide

Romans 9:19-33

For groups meeting May 3 evening through May 10 morning.

God is sovereign. He is just. He is all-powerful. He is all-knowing. He has foreknowledge, which means he knows who will accept His Son and who will reject. There is no doubt that these concepts are difficult for us to understand, because we have a limited ability to do so thanks to our humanity. Paul's point in discussing these concepts is not so that his readers would have a full understanding, but rather that they would see the greatness of God and know that the salvation of each person is in His very capable hands. Paul also emphasized God's mercy over His wrath, though he referenced both in Romans 9:18, "So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

Based on this statement, Paul – as he does throughout this section of the letter – directly addressed a probable question:

*You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"
(Romans 9:19)*

Rather than giving an answer based on human logic, Paul did as Jesus did during his earthly ministry and answered this question with more questions:

*But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" 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?
(Romans 9:20–21)*

This illustration of God as the potter and people as the clay is connected to words from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 45:9, Isaiah 29:16) and also from Jeremiah (Jeremiah 18:4-6). Paul was simply stating that, as God's creation, people do not have the right to complain about how God has formed them. We must consider that without Him, we would not have life at all. In verses 21-23, Paul indicated that there are those who are "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction," and these are people who have refused to turn to God for forgiveness through faith in Christ. Then there are those who are "vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory," and these are people who have placed their faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins.

This group that placed their faith in Christ now included both Jews and Gentiles (v. 24). Paul used Hosea's writing to point out that God had opened His kingdom to those who previously had not been considered His people (vs. 25-26, quoted from Hosea 2:23 and Hosea 1:10). While Hosea's life, ministry and message pointed to God's mercy on the nation of Israel, Paul applied

the prophet's message to the acceptance of those outside the nation of Israel. If God would accept disobedient Jews who turned their hearts to Him, He also would accept disobedient Gentiles who turned their hearts to Him.

It is not as though God was finished with His chosen people, however. Yes, Paul reminded his readers that "only a remnant of them will be saved," and used the words of Isaiah to support his statement (vs. 27-28, quoted from Isaiah 10:22-23). He called to memory the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah – which were completely destroyed in God's judgment upon their wickedness – as examples of what would have happened to Israel if not for this remnant of believers (v. 29, quoted from Isaiah 1:9).

Paul explained the irony of the situation with Gentiles and Jews in relation to God's plan of redemption. Many Gentiles, who had almost no knowledge of God's ways up to this point in history, were able to receive the righteousness of God because they understood this could only happen through faith in Christ (v. 30).

Meanwhile, the Jewish people, who were given all the privileges and knowledge listed in Romans 9:4-5, were unable to receive God's righteousness through the law, "Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works," (v. 32). Paul closed this chapter with two more quotes from Isaiah, which indicated that by rejecting Christ, Israel had "stumbled over the stumbling stone," (vs. 32-33). Below is a note regarding Paul's use of these words from Isaiah 28:16:

They have stumbled over the stumbling stone. In Isaiah 8:13–15 the prophet foretells how the Assyrian invasion will sweep over the land of Israel like the waters of a great flood. But there will be one place of refuge from the overwhelming water: God himself will prove a 'sanctuary' to all who put their trust in him, a rock on which they will stand secure. Those, however, who do not entrust themselves to him but put their confidence in other powers or resources will be swept by the flood against this rock and come to grief upon it; to them, far from being a place of refuge, it will prove a dangerous obstacle—'a stone of offence and a rock of stumbling'. The passage is later quoted to the same effect in 1 Peter 2:8, where Christ is described as ' "A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall"; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do' (destined, that is to say, by the word of God spoken through Isaiah).

'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall.' In Isaiah 28:16, in the course of a warning about the impending deluge from Assyria which will sweep away the 'refuge of lies' in which king and people are putting their trust, the word of God comes to the prophet: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation.' This foundation stone appears to be the righteous remnant, the hope of the future, which is embodied personally in the promised Prince of the house of David.⁶ This oracle is here conflated with Isaiah 8:14 (referred to in the note on verse 32 above). The combination

of the two passages as a prophecy of Christ became commonplace in early Christian apologetic. They are similarly combined in 1 Peter 2:6–8, where they are further linked with a third 'stone' testimonium—the rejected stone of Psalm 118:22.

F. F. Bruce, Romans: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 197–198.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of Paul's answer (v. 20) to his question in verse 19? How does this affect your mindset about God's creative power and authority over mankind?
2. Why do you think Paul used the analogy of the potter and clay to explain God's right to create people as He sees fit? Why is it important to remember concepts such as God's foreknowledge, His omnipotence, His justice and His mercy when considering this analogy?
3. How does Paul's use of Hosea's prophecy communicate the mercy of God? How does this give you hope, personally?
4. Paul used Isaiah's writing to point out that Israel would have been completely destroyed if not for the remnant of people who believed God. How have you seen God intervene in your life to save you? Where would you be without Him?
5. Can you relate to those Jews who attempted to attain righteousness by their works? Why or why not?
6. We still see people "stumble over" Jesus because they can't make sense of him. How can we help others see the truth that Jesus saves and transforms lives? How do we do that in our current circumstances, in the midst of a global pandemic?