

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 13 - Romans 9:19-10:5

Romans 9:19-26

The verses we will study in this segment are difficult ones, in the sense that Paul is speaking from an image of God which is difficult for us to share. Paul basically says, "God controls everything and you have no right to question him." Although this sounds harsh, we must try to understand that Paul is speaking out of anguish and frustration. He is trying to explain why his own people did not accept Jesus, and the only explanation he can give is that this is part of God's plan.

In verse 19, Paul imagines his readers asking a very logical question. If God controls everything, then how can anyone be blamed or condemned for opposing him? Who can resist God's power?

With verses 20 and 21, Paul begins using an image which was very popular in the Hebrew Scriptures, the image of the clay and the potter. Paul says that human beings have no right to question God. God's ways are beyond the comprehension of humanity. Just as the clay cannot complain to the potter, so too, human beings cannot complain to God. As twenty-first century Christians, we would agree with Paul that we cannot fully comprehend divinity, and yet we would also say that we are not clay pots. We are human beings who have been given an intellect and free will. If we could talk to Paul and define the question, we would find that the problem is not with God, the problem is with the image of God portrayed by this analogy. The image of the clay and the potter makes God appear to be a tyrant who manipulates and even causes pain at will. This is not our image of God. And this is not the image of God which Paul portrays in the rest of his letter. We must remember that Paul is addressing people of a Jewish background, and this is the kind of argumentation they would understand.

In verse 22, Paul again speaks of God's power and wrath. In this verse, he seems to relate Pharaoh and unbelieving Israel. Just as Pharaoh was raised up and his heart was hardened so that God could manifest his power, so too, has God hardened the hearts of the Jewish people. But at the same time that Paul is presenting this harsh image, he also gives a hint of hope. He says that God has endured these objects of wrath with "much patience." Paul might be hoping that his readers will recall his words in 2:4 in which he said that God is patient in order to allow time for people to come to conversion.

In verse 23, Paul presents the more positive side of God's power and control. Paul says that God's plan shows the contrast between those who are destined for destruction and those who are destined for glory. The "objects of glory" are the Christians, those called to share life with God and therefore called to glory. We can see how this manner of expression led to the controversy over predestination in the later centuries.

In verse 24, Paul addresses the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians as one body. He had been speaking to the Jewish Christians when he spoke of his own people. But now, Paul wants both groups to recognize their unity as God's people. They have received mercy and will share in the promise.

Paul continues to draw on God's word in the Hebrew Scriptures as he quotes from the prophet Hosea. Since God is free to do as he wishes, he can even transform those who were not his people into his people. With these quotations from Hosea, Paul reiterates that God's word has not failed. God has indeed kept his promise by calling a people to himself. Paul intentionally changes the reference in these texts, for they originally referred to Israel's return to God after they had sinned. But Paul interprets these texts as God's call of the Gentiles to himself. We Christians are called to be the new People of God.

* * * * *

Side Note: The Apocryphal Gospels

Historians estimate that fifteen to twenty gospels were written between the years 50 A.D. and 200 A.D. Of these gospels, only four, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were accepted into the New Testament as inspired works. The others are called "Apocryphal" or "False" gospels. The titles of some of these gospels are "The Gospel of Peter," "The Gospel of the Egyptians," and others. The problem with these false gospels is that they contain errors with regard to what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus. If a gospel was not consistent with the belief of the eyewitnesses of Jesus, that gospel was set aside and not used in the Eucharistic assembly.

Let me give one example of a false teaching. In the Gospel of Thomas, there is an episode which was supposed to have taken place when Jesus was six years old. One day Jesus was walking along the streets of Jerusalem. As he came to the corner of a building, another small boy also came around the corner and accidentally bumped into Jesus. Jesus struck the boy dead on the spot! When the eyewitnesses of Jesus read this account, they said, "No, this is not what we believe about Jesus." If a gospel contained one false teaching, the entire gospel was rejected. The author of the Gospel of Thomas was trying to emphasize the divinity of Jesus and his power over life and death, but he let his imagination run away.

We can be very grateful to the earliest Christians for preserving for us the authentic texts inspired by the Spirit.

Romans 9:27-29

As we begin our commentary today, recall the analogy Paul uses in the preceding verses. He says that the Jewish people are like a lump of clay in the hands of a potter. They have no right to complain to God. God can do whatever he wants. Paul says that it is part of God's plan that many of the Jewish people do not accept Jesus. This argument is difficult for us to accept, but we must remember that Paul is speaking to Jews. He is arguing from the Jewish mentality that God causes everything.

In verses 27 through 29, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah to support his position. The passage contained in verses 27 and 28 is found in Isaiah 10:22-23.

These words were spoken at a time when the Jewish tribes living in the northern part of Palestine were being attacked by the Assyrians, circa 720 B.C. Isaiah had predicted that the northern tribes would be destroyed because of their infidelity and social injustice (Isaiah 5:24-30). But he also foretold that a remnant of the people would survive. This reference to the "remnant" is what Paul wants to emphasize. He quotes this passage to show that just as God has selected a remnant to survive the Assyrian attack, so too, has he selected a remnant to believe in Jesus.

Notice how Paul balances the image of God in the way he juxtaposes verses 28 and 29.

Verse 28 is the end of the quotation from Isaiah 10:22-23. But if we go back and look at this passage in Isaiah, what we see is that Paul has chosen to skip part of the text. He did not include the words, "Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness." Isaiah said this to show that the attack by Assyria was God's way of punishing the people for their infidelity. The word "righteousness" in this context means that God was justified in what he did. But Paul does not want to think of God destroying his Jewish people, so he conveniently overlooks this part. But there is still a somewhat harsh image of God projected in verse 28 as Paul quotes Isaiah, "The Lord will execute his sentence."

Now, in verse 29, Paul softens the image of God. The passage in this verse is from Isaiah 1:9. If Paul and Isaiah do not mind, perhaps we could paraphrase the passage in this way: "Yes, we deserve to be punished for our sins, but look at how merciful God is to us. He allows us to survive. If it was not for the mercy of God, we would have been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah." There is the possibility that Paul is giving an additional hint of hope in this passage. Remember, he intentionally deleted the part about destruction in the previous passage. Paul could be directing the people's thoughts in such a way as to ask, "If God is willing to leave a remnant, then is it possible that he will find a way to save all the Jewish people?" We will soon see that this is the direction Paul takes.

Romans 9:30-10:5

In the verses we will examine now, Paul speaks directly to the question of Israel's unbelief. Paul begins verse 30 with the question, "What then are we to say?" We could paraphrase this as, "How do we explain this irony?" The irony is that the Gentiles were not consciously seeking a right relationship with God. They were not aware of him and they were not aware of the law. But when they were brought into contact with Christ, they believed. They have received righteousness as a gift through faith. On the other hand, Israel was seeking God. They did have the law, and yet they did not attain righteousness. How can this be explained?

Paul addresses this question in chapter 5, but most of what he says has to do with the fact that righteousness is a gift. Now Paul wants to explain why Israel does not accept this gift. The main reason is that they are concentrating their attention in the wrong place. In verse 31, Paul says that they are placing their attention on the law. The Jews thought that if they fulfilled the law, they could earn salvation. They did not understand the purpose of the law. The law was not given as a means of salvation, but rather as an indication of how a person should live. The law was the ideal toward which a person should aim, but no one could fulfill it.

At the end of verse 32, Paul uses an image which is frequently used in the scriptures - the image of the stumbling stone.

The image of the stone in Psalm 118:22, the same image which Jesus applies to himself in Matthew 21:42, is related to but different from the stumbling stone. In the psalm, the stone which is tossed aside, as if useless, becomes the cornerstone. But in the passages from Isaiah which Paul borrows, the stone is intentionally placed in the path and may be the cause of stumbling. Paul interprets this stone as Jesus. The Father gave Jesus as a gift. If someone accepts Jesus, then Jesus becomes the foundation of that person's life. On the other hand, if someone rejects Jesus, then Jesus becomes the occasion for that person's fall.

Verse 33 contains the combined quotation from Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16. What Paul does is insert a line from Isaiah 8:14 into the middle of Isaiah 28:16, and by doing so he makes the new text say almost the opposite of the old text. In Isaiah 28:16, the stone is a means of security, but Paul's arrangement makes the stone a stumbling stone. At the end of the quotation, Paul says "whoever believes in him." He does this to clearly indicate that he is speaking of Jesus.

Chapter 10 begins with Paul's earnest prayer for the salvation of this Jewish people. He knows that God is the God of mercy, and that mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). There just may be a plan by which God will bring his Chosen People to faith in Christ.

In verse 2, Paul acknowledges the zeal which the Jewish people have for God. Life could be difficult for someone who tries to live in accord with the law. Paul does not question their dedication, but the dedication is misdirected. The Jews look upon God as a judge to be satisfied, rather than as a loving Father who wants to bestow his blessings upon his children.

Verse 3 is a repetition of Paul's concern that his people are looking for righteousness in the wrong place. Righteousness comes when we acknowledge our complete dependence upon God. The great saints of our Christian tradition have often said that as we get closer to God, we realize how undeserving we are of his gifts. But the divine life within us purifies us and draws us ever more deeply into the heart of our loving God.

Commentators are not in agreement on the meaning of the words in verse 4, "Christ is the end of the law." Some interpret this to mean that Christ is the goal or culmination of the law. Paul himself says that love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:10). Since Christ is love incarnate, he is indeed the fulfillment of the law. Other commentators say that this text means that Christ is the termination of the law. The law is no longer needed, for Jesus is the way of righteousness. Everyone now has access to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Either interpretation is acceptable. We will have to ask Paul what he meant when we see him in heaven.

In some version of the NSRV, verse 5 begins a new segment entitled "Salvation is for All." Paul shows the universality of God's love and mercy. He quotes Moses, Isaiah and Joel to indicate that God's original plan was for salvation to be received through faith. Remember, the beginning of spirituality is receptivity.

Paul begins verse 5 by invoking the memory of Moses. Paul's Jewish readers believe that Moses is the author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible.

In Leviticus 18:5, Moses says, "You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord." Paul paraphrases this passage as "the person who does these things will live by them." The implication is that if a person is able to keep the law, that person shall be declared righteous. But **no one** is able to keep the law. It is impossible. Righteousness comes only through faith.