

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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Vessels of Wrath and Vessels of Mercy (9:22-23)

In 9:22-23, Paul addresses the potter's vessels as objects of mercy and objects of wrath,

. . . and if God, wishing to show his wrath and make his power known, endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath set for destruction, in order that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he designated for glory, even us, whom he called, not only out of the Jews, but also out of the Gentile

All God's vessels are set for destruction by virtue of their sinful rebellion against God's will; this is true of Jews and Gentiles alike. There are no vessels deserving of mercy. Mercy, by definition, is the withholding of punishment due those who are guilty of transgression. All vessels have become vessels of dishonor and vessels set for destruction; as Paul argued in 3:23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." God did not create some vessels to be honorable and some to be dishonorable. He created all vessels to be honorable (beings created in the image of God). But all vessels created have given themselves over to dishonor. The potter, however, is capable of taking vessels set for destruction and recreating them into vessels of mercy; and in this he demonstrates his glory as the master potter or the Creator.

Paul moves from the issue of the vessel's accountability for his

condition, to the issue of God's right to show his mercy to the Gentiles, just as he had shown mercy to undeserving Israel in the past. God is forever showing mercy to those who have made themselves vessels of wrath. This is Paul's argument here; and this, says Paul, is according to the Scriptures (9:22-29).

**(6) God's Acceptance of the Gentiles Is
"According to the Scriptures" (9:25-29)**

As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call the one not having been loved, "the one having been loved,"(Hosea 2:23)." ²⁶and, "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.' (Hosea 1:10)." ²⁷Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. ²⁸For the Lord will carry out his sentence on the earth (Isaiah 10:22-23)." ²⁹It is just as Isaiah said, If the Lord of Host had not left us a seed, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:9).

In these verses, Paul appears to be arguing very strongly for God's right to bring "new creation" out of the covenant community of Israel, and this new creation included the Gentiles (vv 24-26). Further, if those of the Sinai Covenant did not desire to be a part of God's new creation, that was their choice. They did not, however, have the right to question God's decision to create anew and bring a new creation out of the old; and all this was, according to Paul, "according to the Scriptures."

Then I will sow her for myself in the earth, and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not my people, "You are My people!" and they shall say, "You are my God!" (Hosea 2:23)

After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. ⁹ Then the Lord said, "Call him Lo-Ammi, (Hebrew, "not my people") for you are not my people, and I am not your God. ¹⁰Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God,' (Hosea 1:8-10)

*Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, **only a remnant will return**. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous, (Isa 10: 22).*

The Daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege. ⁹Unless the LORD Almighty had left us a remnant, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah (i.e., totally non-existent - mwl), (Isaiah 1:8-9).

Here we have “prophetic scenes” of God bringing new creation out of the old creation that has become ruined or destroyed. In Paul's thinking, this was what God had done in the coming of Christ. He had taken in hand the old clay that had been marred, and had formed it into a new creation. The imagery of Jeremiah 18:4-6 cannot be far from Paul's mind,

*And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; **so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make**. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: ⁶“O house of Israel, **can I not do with you as this potter?**” says the LORD. “Look, **as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand**, O house of Israel! (Jer 18:4-6)*

(7) I Lay in Zion a Stone of Offence (9:30-33)

*What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, not pursuing righteousness, attained righteousness, a righteousness that is by (Greek *ek* – out of) faith; ³¹but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. ³²Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They **stumbled over the "stumbling stone."** ³³As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion **a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock of offence**, and the one who believes/trust (Hebrew, *aman*) in him will never be put to shame" (Isaiah 8:14; 28:16).*

Why did Israel not attain this righteousness that comes out of faith? “They stumbled,” says Paul. The Greek term used here is *proskopto*, meaning, “to strike against, smite;” thus, “to strike against a stone or other obstacle, to be made to stumble by something.” Israel stumbled over, “a stone of stumbling,” something that was in their way; something Isaiah

called, “a stone of stumbling” and “a rock of offence.” The expression, “rock of offence” is a “*petran skandalou*.”

Paul wrote of the Jews’ attitude toward Jesus’ messianic claims in 1 Cor 1:23, “we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block (*skandalon*) to the Jews and to the Gentiles foolishness.” The Greek word *skandalon* is the word from which we get the English word “scandal.” The verb form, *skandalizo*, means, “to cause someone to be offended or become indignant.” It literally means, “a cause of offence or indignation.” To the Jews, Jesus was a cause of offence or indignation. Why? In their thinking, the Messiah does not fall in defeat to his enemies. Jesus’ death was proof of the falsehood of his messianic claims. The *Torah* said, “cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Deut 21:23). This was a part of the *Torah* with which Paul was very familiar (Gal 3:13).

The quote here is taken from a combination of Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16. The terms drawn from the Isaiah 8:14 text are, “a stone of stumbling,” and “a rock of ruin/devastation.” The Septuagint reading of Isaiah 28:16 is as follows:

This is what the Lord (kurios) is saying, "Behold, I am placing for a foundation in Zion, a stone of great value, a chosen cornerstone, a foundation of great esteem [or recognition], and the one believing (ho pisteuon) on him, should not be made ashamed (my translation – mwl).

The stone God placed as “a foundation” in Zion, the stone of “great value,” the “chosen cornerstone,” this foundation of “great esteem” was not believed on by Israel. This stone was Jesus of Nazareth, and his claims to be the Messiah made him “a stone of stumbling” and “a rock of ruin/devastation” to the Jewish nation. In the Septuagint, the expression “a rock of ruin/devastation” is “*petras ptomati (ptoma)*. *Ptoma* means, “to be brought to ruin as a dead body or corpse” and is translated as “corpse” in Matt 24:28 and Mark 6:29. In the place of the Septuagint’s *ptoma*, Paul substitutes the Greek *skandalon*, which means, “something offensive, scandalous, a cause of indignation.”

That which caused them to be so scandalized, so offended, so filled with indignation, was the fact that Jesus of Nazareth did not fit their requirements of a Messiah. He was not what they wanted the Messiah to be

and he did not do what they expected the Messiah to do. They wanted deliverance from Roman oppression. They wanted their land back. They wanted the Romans off their land and out of their lives. The most common theme of the messianic expectation for the Jews of the first century Mediterranean world was that of “deliverance from oppression.” When Messiah came he would call the forces of God to war against the forces of oppression and free Israel from their enslavement, as God had done for their forefathers in the exodus from Egypt.

This was the most essential and dominant theme of the writings of the Dead Sea sect, which was a first century Jewish community settled on the cliffs above the Dead Sea. They were the ones who wrote the “Dead Sea Scrolls” discovered in 1947. One of their scrolls was called, “*The War Scroll*,” which foretold of a cataclysmic war that was to take place between “the sons of light” and “the sons of darkness.” The Messiah, according to the Dead Sea sect, would lead the forces of the sons of light into battle against the sons of darkness; the final battle being the “battle of Magog,” of Ezekiel 38-39, this same battle is referred to in Rev 20:8, and called in Rev 16:16, “Armageddon.”

The Messiah God had sent, came to deliver man from the satanic powers of sin and death, the forces of darkness that enslaved the whole human race. His conquest was over death itself. Not just a conquest of land for the Jews, but a hope for everyman, every woman, every human creation of God until the end of life on earth. Perhaps, that kind of deliverance not exclusive enough; or maybe such a concept had too much depth, was too profound, too spiritual, too otherworldly of them. They wanted a thisworldly Messiah, a warrior, a military hero figure. God sent them what they most desperately needed; and again, the issue of what man wanted was set over against the will of God, thus creating another crisis between man and God. Man never seems to wander far from the Garden of Eden and the awful choice of “what he wants” set against the will of God.

Conclusion

Yet, God remains longsuffering, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, as Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3:9; and Paul says that those to whom he shows mercy are those who come to him in repentance, asking for his mercy, those in whom there is yet something redemptive. But those to whom he displays his righteous anger are those in

whom nothing redemptive can be found. They, because of their obsessive self-will have destroyed themselves as creations of God and made themselves into vessels of dishonor and vessels of wrath.

But, as vessels in the hand of the divine potter, man can become what God created us to be; a being created in his image, and this essentially involves volition and responsibility – the freedom of choice and accountability for that choice. If he chooses to show mercy to some and not to others, it will be the result of the choices of the vessel (9:21-24). The potter has created all vessels in his image, after his likeness, and wills that they all live as beings so created. If they choose to defy his will and destroy or deface the image of God in themselves, they make **themselves** into vessels of dishonor and wrath.

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