

Lesson 23: Presuming on God, Israel Misunderstands His Mercy

Romans 9:6-29

⁶ But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed.

I. God's people are defined by God's choice, not by human descent or human works (Patriarchs).

For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel;

⁷ nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants,
but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."

⁸ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

(1) ⁹ For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON."

(2) ¹⁰ And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹ for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹² it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." ¹³ Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

II. God's free choice of mercy is just because it depends on his desire, not on human action (Moses).

¹⁴ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

(1) ¹⁶ So then it *does* not *depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

(2) ¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

III. God's wrath rightly belongs to all, so God is free to show mercy or wrath according to his plan.

¹⁹ You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"

²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?

²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

²² What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ And *He did so* to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴ *even us*, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

IV. God announced ahead of time his plan to harden Israel and to include Gentiles (Prophets).

(1) ²⁵ As He says also in Hosea, "I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE,' AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, 'BELOVED.'" ²⁶ "AND IT SHALL BE THAT IN THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS SAID TO THEM, 'YOU ARE NOT MY PEOPLE,' THERE THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF THE LIVING GOD."

(2) ²⁷ Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED; ²⁸ FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD ON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY."

(3) ²⁹ And just as Isaiah foretold, "UNLESS THE LORD OF SABAOth HAD LEFT TO US A POSTERITY, WE WOULD HAVE BECOME LIKE SODOM, AND WOULD HAVE RESEMBLED GOMORRAH."

NASB

Introduction

With the Israelites rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ, both in Paul's day and in the majority through the centuries up to our present day, how do we understand the promises God made to Israel? And how do we explain that the vast majority of those who have believed in Jesus are non-Jews? What does it mean to be the people of God? Who are the people of God?

Paul starts off Romans 9 with his own personal lament over the hardening of Israel to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now he is ready to take us into the Old Testament to explain how God's own Old Covenant people are largely left out of the New Covenant people. Paul's argument in Romans 9 and 10 covers the issue from God's side and from man's side. In the pride and presumption that has developed out of their special relationship to God, the people of Israel have come to misunderstood both sides. From God's side they have misunderstood the role of mercy, and from the human side they have misunderstood the role of faith.

In this lesson we address the misunderstanding of mercy. In our next lesson we will address the misunderstanding of faith.

To explain how Israel has misunderstood mercy, Paul will give us four main points moving from the Patriarchs in Genesis to Moses and the Exodus to the words of the prophets.

We begin with the Patriarchs in 9:6-13 where Paul starts with the assertion that God's people are defined by God's choice, not by bloodline or by human works.

I. God's people are defined by God's choice, not by human descent or human works (Patriarchs).

[Read Romans 9:6-13]

The first mention of Israel comes in the second half of verse 6. We need to establish what we mean by Israel right now before we go any further. It is possible to speak of Abraham as having spiritual children, and to speak of the church as a spiritual Israel. That is not what Paul is doing here. The argument follows quite clearly that Paul is clarifying the blood line that eventually produces the twelve physical tribes of Israel. With the possible exception of Israel in 11:25, all of Paul's uses of the term Israel in Romans 9-11, which are all of his uses of Israel in the entire letter, quite clearly refer to the actual people Israel. Paul does not use the term in Romans as a reference to a spiritual Israel. And he doesn't use it as a reference to the church.

When Paul says that not all descended from Israel are Israel, he is not trying to widen out who might be considered Israel. He is doing the opposite. He is narrowing in our definition of who is Israel. He presents two cases of two brothers in order to show that only one of the two brothers helps to father Israel. One brother is chosen. The other is not. Which brother is considered the promise child depends on God's free choice, not on human tradition. As Paul says in verse 8, "It is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."

Paul starts with Abraham and Sarah in verse 9, and so, our two brothers are going to be Ishmael and Isaac. Years after God had promised descendants, they did not seem to be able to have a child. So, Abraham and Sarah decided to help God out through the culturally acceptable method of choosing a surrogate maid who would produce a child. This child would be legally designated as Abraham and Sarah's heir. Hagar had a child named Ishmael. God, however, refused to accept Ishmael as the promised child. He would not be held bound by Abraham and Sarah's plan or by human tradition. And so, even if it had not been clear up to this point, God made quite clear that his promise was not just that Abraham would have a child, but Abraham and Sarah would have a child together. Isaac became that child through whom God would fulfill his promise to Abraham.

So then, Paul moves on to Isaac's children in verses 10-12. In this case, Rebekah gave birth to twins with Esau narrowly beating out Jacob as first born. And, in spite of human tradition, God chose the second born. He chose Jacob. He renamed Jacob Israel and through his twelve sons the twelve tribes were born.

So, in neither Abraham's case nor in Isaac's case was God bound by human decision or tradition regarding who would father Israel. The choice was God's to make. This is the point Paul wants us to remember. God is in charge of who gets designated as his people.

We also need to recognize at this point that we are not talking about individual salvation. We are talking about how God chose Israel for their special role. It does not automatically follow that Ishmael and all of his descendants nor that Esau and all of his descendants are excluded from the eternal kingdom of God. It was possible under the Old Covenant to trust in God and receive his grace

without being an Israelite. We can think of Melchizedek or the Canaanite Rahab or the Syrian general Naman. We do have this harsh quote in verse 13, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” So, we need to talk about that a minute. It is probably helpful to recognize that hated does not necessarily mean in the Old Testament language that God felt hatred towards Esau but rather that he acted out wrathfully against Esau. It is even more helpful to note that Paul is not quoting from Genesis but from Malachi 1:2. It’s the last book in the Old Testament. Even as the name Israel can designate a person or designate a nation, so also the names Isaac and Esau can be used to either designate an individual or to designate the nation born of the individuals. And that is exactly what Malachi is doing. Malachi is using Isaac and Esau not as a designation of the two brothers, but as the nations that came from the two brothers, the nation Israel and the nation Edom. God’s hatred is described by Malachi as making Esau’s “mountains desolate” and “appointing his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” It’s destruction. So, though the majority of people in Israel and the majority of people in Edom both deserved God’s wrath for their wickedness, God brought Israel back from the Babylonian exile and that is an expression of love through mercy, while he allowed Edom to be destroyed. So, Malachi describes the compassionate mercy shown to one wicked people, and that is love; and just wrath shown to the other which he describes as hate.

Recognizing the reference as nations instead of individuals fits with the corporate view that Paul now attends to. His examples indicated God’s choice of individual men. That’s true. He was talking about the choice of Isaac over Ishmael and the choice of Jacob over Esau. But then the point is that those individual men were chosen to give birth to the corporate groups. Edom was not the chosen people. Israel was. This does not mean that no Edomite entered the kingdom of heaven, either. It does mean that the special Old Covenant people was not Edom. It was Israel. So far, that is the election we are talking about. Who was chosen to be the people of God and what was the basis for that choice. Israel was chosen. And the basis was not their righteousness or their size. It was not that somehow Jacob was a better little baby than Esau was. And certainly in the story of their growing up, Jacob wasn’t a better person than Esau. It was not based on human tradition or human desire or human planning or human righteousness. God made the free choice of which people would fill this special role. That was God’s idea and God’s plan, God’s choice.

Paul’s next point is going to come to us from the time of Moses. He is arguing that God’s free choice of mercy is just. And it is just because it does not depend on human criteria. So, we see this in Romans 9:14-18. Let’s read that.

II. God’s free choice of mercy is just because it depends on his desire, not on human criteria (Moses).

[Read Romans 9:14-18]

Paul’s rhetorical language here reminds us of chapters 6 and 7 in Romans. He starts with an introductory question, “What shall we say then?” After that he uses a question to raise an objection, “There is no injustice with God, is there?” And he gives us the short answer, “May it never be!” Then we move on to a more developed answer.

The answer shows one of the challenges in making a clean distinction between God’s work through a group and God’s work through individuals. From the corporate sense, God chose to pour his wrath on Egypt, while he showed mercy to Israel. But from the individual sense, God’s purpose with the group Egypt involved his work on the individual who was Pharaoh over Egypt.

Paul first quotes from Exodus 33:19 where he says, “‘I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.’” And here we are talking about Israel. This is in the immediate context of Exodus 32-34, God has just shown mercy to the people of Israel for breaking the ten commands in fashioning a golden calf. God chose not to destroy them. So, when it says God, “will have mercy on whom he has mercy,” that’s who he is talking about; his merciful decision not to destroy Israel after the golden calf incident. And it is corporate mercy. It is mercy to the whole group. It doesn’t mean that everyone in Israel at that moment has eternal life or has faith in God. It’s a mercy shown to the nation of Israel to not destroy them. We are talking about the group.

The next reference moves from mercy for Israel to wrath on Pharaoh. God calls both stubborn and rebellious, both Israel and Pharaoh in Exodus have a similar character (Exodus 33:3; 7:14). But God has a special plan for Pharaoh that does not include mercy. God plans to show his power through Pharaoh. The Exodus story rotates between reporting that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (literally, “made heavy,” Exodus 8:15; 9:32) and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened (literally, “strong,” 7:22; 8:19). The picture we get from the narrative this. It is a man opposed to God and opposed to Israel and he has absolutely no intention of ever submitting to God as God. We could imagine that it is possible that Pharaoh might give in out of weakness or out of defeat but not out of humility. His character is against God. And God strengthens Pharaoh according to that character, according to the character he already possesses, according to his sinful flesh. He strengthens Pharaoh to continue in his rebellion in opposition to God, so that the full measure of God’s wrath might come down on Egypt. So, strengthening Pharaoh’s already hard heart, ensures that the battle between God and the gods of Egypt will go to the full measure. All of the ten plagues will be done, and their will be the final destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. God enabled Pharaoh to live out the full extent of his wicked and rebellious heart. When it said that God hardened his heart that does not mean that God, at that moment, made him sinful and rebellious. It means he hardened an already sinful and rebellious heart.

Paul’s quote of the Exodus story should bring hearty agreement from a Jewish listener. God shows mercy on whom he shows mercy, and in this case Israel, and God hardens whom he chooses to harden, in this case Egypt. That is a pattern Israel can accept. Paul’s point here is that God is just in his determination of who receives mercy and who is strengthened in the hardness of their heart, because the determination has to do with God’s wisdom and not with human rights or demands. It depends on the desire of God.

And this brings us to Paul’s next point in 19-24 that God’s wrath rightly belongs to all, so God is free to show mercy or wrath according to the wisdom of his plan. This is Romans 9:19-24.

III. God’s wrath rightly belongs to all, so God is free to show mercy or wrath according to his plan.

[Read Romans 9:19-24]

Paul recognizes that he has not satisfied the question about God’s justice. In verse 19 Paul suggests an objection to his teaching that God has the right to show mercy to whom he wants and to harden whom he wants. A natural objection to such an assertion is this, “Why then does God still find fault? For who resists his will?” The objection follows from the idea that God is just in hardening Pharaoh’s heart. But if God hardens, how can man be held accountable?

Paul is going to come with an argument that feels at first glance fairly unhelpful. At first glance, it seems to be saying, “Just shut up and accept it.” I don’t think that is quite the right tone. But I think there is something similar to that. Paul says this, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?” I believe Paul, he is telling us to step back. He is not telling us to shut up and be quiet. But he is telling us to think about what you are saying. Step back in your indignation and remind yourself who you are talking to. Who is really the better judge of what is just and right? Are we human beings, are we really qualified to call God out and to require him to explain his own actions? Do his desires and plans need to live up to our standard of what is just? Is my philosophy so sound that I believe that I can bring a complaint against God? I, being a sinful, self-absorbed human being, limited in knowledge about human nature, limited in the facts of history, limited in rational ability, limited in moral ability and limited in understanding regarding what true holiness is in the first place, am I claiming to have insight into the nature of justice to such a degree that I can take God to task and let him know that what he thinks is just is really not just? Is that the attitude I am coming at God with?

I think it is okay for us to not get it. If God is the one who mercifully has to draw people to himself and if God can harden a man’s heart, then does man really have choice in this? And if man does not have choice, how is it that God can hold him morally accountable? It is a fair question. It is just a

question we ought to ask with caution. We know the Bible teaches that God has the right to harden someone's heart. We know that the Bible teaches that God must work in a person if they are actually to have the eyes of their heart open so that they can see him and believe. We know that is what the Bible says. But we also know that the Bible holds men morally responsible for their actions. So, the Bible is teaching both that God must and that God does work in the hearts of men and women and that people are held morally accountable.

How do those two things work together? I am not sure, to be honest, how they work together. But I know that God is just. And I know that however it works out that God knows what he is doing and that God has the right sovereignly to choose to show mercy to whom he would show mercy and to harden whom he would harden. And I don't need to give up my philosophical questions. It is valid to hold questions. And to think, "Am I really understanding this correctly?" But if I am not able to approach it with a humility appropriate to my status. If I am not able to say, "You know what, I really am very limited in my ability to understand righteousness, holiness and justice. And God is God. If I can't come to the question with that much humility, I have no place calling God to account. Paul is saying, "Take a step back and consider who you are and consider who you are accusing of injustice, and maybe just maybe go read Job again, and see how it worked out for him."

But then after the rebuke, after Paul says, "Who are you to talk back O man?" He does give us an answer. He describes God as a potter and the nations as vessels, some designed for wrath and some for mercy. There are a number of points here we should pay attention to.

1. The clay God works with is not neutral material but sinful human flesh.

First, we should recognize in verse 21 that the same lump of clay God uses to make some vessel's for honorable use and some for common use is human sinful human flesh. As in the example with Pharaoh, God not starting with a good person and hardening him. He does not even start with neutral material. God starts with sinful material in every single case, and either is allowing it to continue in the direction it is already going, or he steps in to intervene. The common use appropriate to all vessels is wrath. That's our starting point. Mercy is the uncommon. Mercy is God withholding the just response due to all. Nobody has a demand on mercy. One reason we have to be very careful about demanding justice, if you demand justice, you just might get it, and you don't want it. You want mercy, not justice.

2. God has the right to bring wrath at any time and to show patience to anyone.

In verse 22 we notice that Paul starts an if/then statement which he does not complete. We have the "if", but we don't have the "then." I like Douglas Moo's suggestion that we should complete the sentence and that the natural completion of the idea would be to say something like this, "What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"...then should we not acknowledge the righteousness of God to act in such a manner?" That's the part he would add, "should we not acknowledge the righteousness of God to act in such a manner?" The idea turns our thinking around a little bit. Whereas we might question the justice of God exerting wrath, here Paul argues that God should be permitted to show patience. His argument is aimed towards the Jewish presumption of wrath on Gentiles. Paul's point is that God is righteous to show patience towards pagan Gentiles if he so chooses, and he is righteous to show patience towards an apostate Israel if he wants to.

3. Pronouncement of wrath in the Old Testament includes an implicit call to repentance.

The potter analogy used by Paul is reminiscent of Jeremiah 18:1-6, Isaiah 29:16, and Isaiah 45:9. The use of the potter like this was something very familiar in the prophets. So, you have to assume Paul had that in his mind. The strongest connection seems to be with the Jeremiah passage, Jeremiah 18:1-6, where the prophet describes God as a potter and warns Israel that God has the right to destroy this vessel he has begun and to start all over. Following that pronouncement by Jeremiah, God says to Israel, "Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds (Jeremiah 18:11)." So what we

see is that the pronouncement of wrath that God has the right to start over with the vessel is followed up by this call to repentance. "Pay attention to what is happening to you Israel. As this wrath is coming on you, let it be the sign and the motive to turn you around and come back to me." And this seems to be an implicit principle whenever God decrees wrath. There is always this idea that that wrath is going to come and it is going to be on the people until they repent and turn back to God.

Even closer to our current context than Jeremiah, we can see this idea in Romans 2:4a that one of the reasons for God's patience in holding off wrath is to give opportunity for repentance. That is what Romans 2:4 says, "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you toward repentance." It is difficult to rule out the idea that God's patience towards objects of wrath might include a merciful motive. He is providing time for repentance before he brings about final destruction. The coming wrath or the beginning of experiencing wrath or even patience before the wrath occurs all of that could be intended to provide opportunity for the one under wrath to repent and turn and receive mercy.

4. The primary theme of this passage is corporate choice, not individual choice.

We also need to remind ourselves again that Paul's context here is about corporate choice, not individual choice. Just like with Jeremiah, the vessels are not individuals in this current context but nations. The vessel on the potter's wheel was Israel, not an individual Israelite. We are talking about God's choice of wrath or mercy on one of two corporate entities, we either are talking about Israel or Gentiles, or maybe some nation of Gentiles. And because we are talking about entire groups experiencing wrath, we also recognize that wrath on a group does not necessarily mean wrath on every individual member of the group. The wrath of God on a people often moves some in the group to repentance even if it is a small minority or small remnant. Those who repent receive mercy in the form of forgiveness and in relationship with God, even though they may still be included in the consequences that fall on the nation as a whole. Daniel and his friends are just such an example of individuals caught in a response of wrath to corporate Israel. The invading army of Babylon is fulfilling God's punishment, and though Daniel and his friends do not escape the wrath of exile, they do experience the mercy of God in relationship with him and later in their life experience. So, wrath on a nation does not always necessitate wrath on every individual within that corporate people group.

Recognizing that the vessels of wrath are the corporate groups of Israel and Gentiles, it also means we have to be careful in how we apply the passage to our theology of individual salvation. The language of hardening and the language of mercy here could apply to individuals, but I have to be careful because how Paul is applying it right here is primarily towards groups.

I am not trying here trying to give us a way to get out of predestination. That's really clear in Romans 8:29 where Paul is talking about individuals who are being reformed into the image of Christ. And he talks about them as being predestined, called, justified and glorified. And he is not talking about groups. He is not talking about nations. He is talking about individual people. That's Romans 8. What I am saying is that we need to allow Paul to argue what he is arguing, and to then take care in how we apply that argument to related issues that are not Paul's primary consideration. And right here Paul is talking about who gets designated as the people of God and within that his choice to show mercy to a particular people group or to show wrath to a people group. So, we are talking about corporate groups. That's our primary focus here in this section.

5. Paul surprises the listener at the end by switching around the vessel of mercy and the vessel of wrath.

Moving on with Paul's argument, we see in verse 23 that one of the reasons God might show patience to groups deserving wrath is to bring about mercy on others. A good Jew at the time of Paul might naturally interpret Paul's words here with Gentiles in the place of wrath and Israel in the place of mercy. The Jew might understand the dominance of the Gentile Roman people over Israel as God showing patience to Rome, which is clearly vessel of wrath, to make known the riches of his glory to Israel, God's vessel of. Up to this point that works with the argument. The Jew may be following Paul with careful agreement. Isaac's descendants are chosen for blessing, not Ishmael's. Good so far. Then

Israel's descendants are chosen, not Esau's. Still good. Then with Moses, Israel receives mercy while Pharaoh and Egypt experience wrath. Amen to that. But then the shocker comes. Up to this point it is clear that the vessels of wrath are Gentile people, and the vessels of mercy are Israel. Israel is the one to whom God made known the riches of his glory. Israel is the one prepared beforehand for glory. Right. Wrong. This is where Paul completes a somersault in mid-air with a full twist and everything gets turned around. He declares in verse 24 that the vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory are, and this is how he says it, "even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles."

The vessel of God's mercy here is the body of Christ. It is not a we, and it is not a they. It is an us. We are the church among whom both Jew and Gentile are included. Sadly, at this moment in salvation history, Israel is the vessel of wrath. God bore with Israel patiently to bring about the death and resurrection of the Messiah, to bring about the birth of the church in Israel, and to bring about the spread of the church to the Gentiles. Even while Israel was in rebellion and deserving of wrath, God showed patience with Israel, so that the vessel of his mercy, the body of Christ, this group from many nations, might come to know the glory of his riches. These believers in Jesus are the ones prepared beforehand to experience the glory of the new kingdom. So, where he has been leading all along for the Jews to clearly see themselves as the vessels of mercy, right at the end we see it switching around, and it is at this point of time we are not talking about Israel, we are talking about the church.

God's institution of a new covenant brought about a reformulation of how we answer the question, "Who are the people of God?" We have a new orientation. It is not completely unexpected. God indicated the coming change through the prophets. And that's the fourth and final point of this passage, that God announced his plan ahead of time, his plan to harden Israel and to include Gentiles. That's in Romans 9:25-29. Let's read that.

IV. God announced ahead of time his plan to harden Israel and to include Gentiles (Prophets).

[Read Romans 9:25-29]

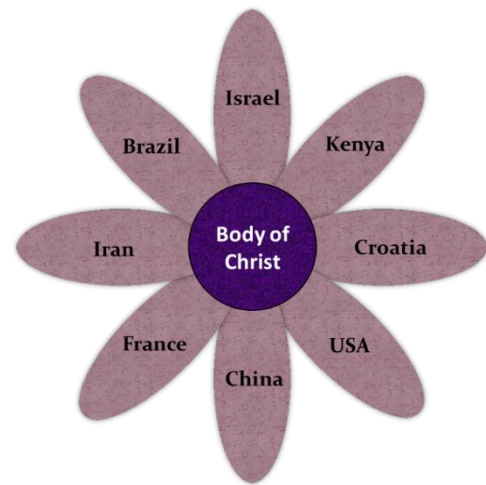
The new orientation prophesied here by Hosea and Isaiah involves not only the inclusion of Gentiles but a significant hardening among the majority of Israel; to be like Sodom, to be like Gomorrah, unless he had left us a remnant. There will be a remnant, but that is all.

The word locus, it's a good word, it means the position or place where something is located or situated. And it is a helpful word in recognizing a shift from the Old Covenant people of God to the New Covenant people of God. There has been a shift in locus.

While the Old Covenant was in effect, the locus of the people of God was Israel, geo-political Israel. God's plan involved a nation that had a geo-graphic center and a political center, and that would be the place where right worship and right behavior would be defined by the Law of Moses. God told Israel in Deuteronomy 4:6, "Keep and do the words of this law, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" And though Yahweh was never a local God but always God of gods and King of kinds, he did decide to establish a people in a particular locality to shine forth his glory. They were to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6)." The plan was for one nation to stand out as special, and as such to be a witness to all other peoples. This was God's plan under the Old Covenant, but that covenant and that plan were always meant to serve a temporary purpose, until the coming of Jesus Christ and a new covenant.



And that New Covenant is a new wineskin. You can't do the New Covenant just like the Old Covenant. And one way that it is really new is a shift in locus. The locus of the people of God has shifted to Jesus Christ. It is a spiritual locus. And locus who is a person, not a place. The people of God are a remnant from all nations, being comprised of every person who truly believes in Jesus Christ. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "An hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father...but an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:21, 23)." The locus of the people of God is Jesus Christ. And the people of God is now comprised of everyone who has truly believed in him and worships him in spirit and in truth. And the concrete expression of the people of God is now found in the local community of believers, the expression of the body of Christ.



This is what the Jews of Paul's day did not understand, could not understand, would not allow themselves to understand. God's plan involved disassociating the people of God from the nation state Israel and opening wide the doors of mercy to Gentiles. This Israel could not accept. In answering the question, "Who are the people of God?" They misunderstood that the compassion of God shown earlier in his choice of them was now being shown in a new way to include Gentiles. They missed mercy.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 9:6-29?
2. In this passage we have mention of both individuals and groups. We have Isaac, Jacob and Pharaoh who are individuals, and we have Israel and Gentiles who are groups. Sometimes we have individual names like Israel and Esau that represent groups (the nation formed of their descendants). Do you believe that the focus of the passage is on God's choice of groups or God's choice of individuals? What is the big picture question being addressed in the passage?
3. Read Malachi 1:1-5. This is the last prophetic book in the Bible. The prophecy happens over 1000 years after the births of Jacob and Esau. How does this Old Testament context help you understand the harsh sounding quote in Romans 9:13?
4. Does it make a difference to you when Paul talks about hardening Pharaoh or about molding vessels of wrath that the starting material for any individual or group of individuals is sinful human flesh? What difference does that make to this present passage?
5. Paul has shown through this passage that Israel was not chosen as a vessel of mercy to be God's people because of their own works or size or righteousness. God chose them against human tradition according to his plan (Isaac and Jacob), and God kept showing mercy in spite of their sinfulness (Israel at Mt. Sinai – 9:15). Now God has chosen to show that mercy to Gentile peoples, including them into his people with those Israelites who believe (9:24). In this Israel has misunderstood that they have stood by God's mercy and so should not be surprised or jealous with God's decision to extend mercy further. Why do you think it was so hard for Israel to accept the fact that God has now included Gentiles?
6. How do you think about the people of God today? Does the daisy chart help you to see that the body of Christ is a remnant from of believers from all tribes and tongues and languages? What are some significant differences between the people of God as formed under the Old Covenant and the people of God as formed under the New Covenant?