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The Potter and the Clay: Calvinism or Choice?

Kerry Duke

For anyone who is not a Calvinist, Romans 9 is one of the hardest passages to explain, especially what Paul said about the potter and the clay. He said, "Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?" (Roman. 9:21). And don't we sing the song, "Thou are the potter, I am the clay; mold me and make me, after Thy will..."?

John Calvin quoted this verse and said God has the right to make you into whatever He decides and you have nothing to do with choosing your destiny. You're just a piece of clay.

Sure, the Holy Spirit used this illustration. Yes, Ecclesiastes 9:1 says the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. But does that mean we cannot and do not choose between heaven and hell? Calvinism says we do not make that call.

Here is the section in Romans 9 where Paul mentioned the potter and the clay. It begins in Romans 9:19: **Slide 2** "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?' But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?" (Rom. 9:19-24).

If you only read these verses and nothing else, you can easily overapply the illustration Paul used.

Before we look more closely at what Paul said about the potter and the clay, let me recommend and read a few lines from the greatest commentary ever written on these words of Scripture. It was written by Paul himself, and it is called the book of Romans. If we are to

understand what Paul means by the potter and the clay, we must remember the context of the book as a whole.

Let's begin in chapter 1. In Romans 1:16 we find the theme for what follows: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek." The gospel is God's power to save both Jews and Gentiles. That is what this book is about. And the first thing Paul does after he stated the purpose of this book was to show how much the Gentiles and the Jews needed saving.

In Romans 1:18-32 Paul shows how sinful the Gentiles were. They had turned away from the revelation of God in nature. They served idols and gave themselves to homosexuality and all kinds of evil. They needed the saving power of the gospel.

Any Jew who read Romans 1 would admit this. He would say probably "Amen" to what Paul said in Romans 1. The Jews despised the Gentiles and their pagan ways. This reminds us of the book of Amos. The prophet first denounced the sins of other nations, then rebuked the people of Israel.

In Romans one Paul rebuked the Gentiles for their sins. In Romans 2 he begins to talk to *Jews*. He describes the Jewish mindset. He shows us how they thought. This chapter is very important if we're going to understand chapter nine where Paul talks about the potter and the clay.

The topic from Romans 2:1 all the way through the end of chapter 11 is the state of the Jewish people, the nation of Israel. Where do they stand with God? How can they be saved? What is their hope for the future?

Paul begins chapter 2 with a rebuke: "Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?" (Rom. 2:1-3).

Jews were big on judging others but blind to their sins. They criticized the awful sins of the Gentiles that Paul just denounced in chapter 1, but they were guilty of breaking their law.

Notice the words “You” and “O man.” Paul did not specifically say he’s talking to Jews here, but he’ll make that clear a few verses later. File these words in your mind because they will be helpful when we get to Romans 9.

Paul continues in verse 4 (remember, he is talking to a typical unconverted Jew), “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:4-5).

There are several things just in this passage that go against Calvinism, and, at the same time, shed light on Romans 9. One is what he says about the goodness of God. He says the goodness of God *leads* you to repentance. He does not say the goodness of God *causes, makes, or forces* you to repent. He says it *leads* you to repentance. The word *leads* is in the present tense, and it is a species of the present tense in which the action is being attempted, tried, or, in a bad sense, threatened.

For instance, in John 10:32, Jesus said to the Jews, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone me?” “You stone me” is present tense. But these Jews were not actually stoning Jesus. They were *attempting* to stone Him.

In the same way, God wants to bring men to salvation. He wants all men to repent (II Pet. 3:9). One of the ways that He induces men to repent is through His goodness.

But although God wants men to repent and works to lead them to repentance, Romans 2:4 tells us that a man can despise that goodness as it seeks to bring us to repentance. A man can choose to be impenitent even though God wants him to repent. That is completely against Calvinistic thinking.

Paul says in spite of the fact that the goodness of God leads one to repent (v. 4), the typical unbelieving Jew of his day hardened his heart and refused to repent (v. 5)! If God is sovereign in the sense Calvinists

tell us, then *everything* is under His control. But verse 4 says He tries to lead men to repent and verse 5 says they refuse to repent!

Notice in verse 5 that these impenitent sinners were storing up the *wrath* of God against themselves “in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.” They made the choice to incur the wrath of God. That’s important because in Romans 9 Paul refers to these impenitent Jews as “vessels of wrath.”

Calvinists find themselves even more at odds with Paul in Romans 2:6-11: “Who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness--indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.”

God is not a partial God. But if Calvin’s view of election is true, then God is partial. But Calvin said, “All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation” (*Institutes*, III, 21.5). What could be more contrary to the Word of God?

Charles Spurgeon once said, “Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else” (*The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 1, 1856). According to him, if you believe Paul, you must believe Calvin. But the reverse is the case. If you accept what Paul wrote, you cannot believe Calvin.

This is why Romans 2 and verses like I Timothy 2:4 and II Peter 3:9 will always be a thorn in the side of Calvinists. They can respond to these verses, but they cannot give a meaningful explanation of them.

Everything in Romans 2:6-11 goes against Calvinism. He says God will “render to each one according to his deeds.” But Calvinism says God will render to each one according to His eternal decree. Paul says God will give eternal life to those who *do good* and *seek* for immortality. But Calvinism says man can do neither. Paul says God will pour out His wrath on those who “do not obey the truth.” But Calvinism says a man cannot obey or disobey God. How could any system of theology be more opposed to the plain teaching of Scripture?

After Paul explains that Jews were judged by the law of Moses while Gentiles were judged by moral law they discerned from nature in verses 12-16, he addresses the Jew by name in verse 17: **Slide 3** “Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law” (Rom. 2:17-20).

This is how a typical Jew saw himself in the first century. He was arrogant, condescending, and had a false sense of security. This pride led him to be hardened and argumentative. Everybody else needed correction, but not him.

In I Thessalonians 2 Paul said the Jews “killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost” (vv. 15-16).

Paul was not anti-Semitic. He was a Jew. And yet he said that they were “contrary to all men” and that the wrath of God had come upon them to the uttermost. This fits with what He said in Romans 2, and it also corresponds to what we read in Romans 9.

After Paul described the Jewish mindset in Romans 2:17-20, he rebuked them for the same reason that Jesus did. They were hypocrites. They said and did not. They professed godliness but they did not practice it. That is what we read in Romans 2:21-24.

From this point through chapter 11, Paul is talking about God’s plan of salvation especially within the context of this Jewish mindset. There are dozens of other legitimate questions and points in these chapters. But I am only addressing what Paul said in Romans nine, so let us turn to that section.

The first thing Paul does in this chapter is to express his grief over these lost Jews. “I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed

from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen” (Rom. 9:1-5).

Paul did not hate His people. He loved them. He did not rejoice because they were lost; he grieved. He talks about their rich national and spiritual heritage. He had already talked about the advantages of the Jews in chapter 3:1-2, especially the fact that they had the Scriptures. But in spite of these favors they were lost. In Romans 3:3 he asks, “For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?” His answer in that chapter was absolutely not.

Now he continues this same question in greater detail in chapter 9 by saying in verse 6, **Slide 4** “But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect.” That is a key statement. It sets the stage of the discussion in chapters 9, 10, and 11. God’s promises did not fail because the Jews failed. God did what He intended to do. His promises held true—*when you understand their meaning and intent*.

In the first place, many Israelites had rejected the plan of God in His only begotten Son, but “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (v. 6). Not all fleshly Israelites were true spiritual Israelites. Romans 2 again explains, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (vv. 28-29).

Then Paul also says in Romans 9 that just being born a physical descendant of Abraham did not make one a part of the chosen nation. That nation descended specifically from Jacob or Israel. “Nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’ That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: ‘At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son’” (vv. 7-9).

Jacob, not Esau as would normally be the case since he was the firstborn, was the chosen heir of the promise. That promise was made

before the twins were born. “And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, ‘The older shall serve the younger’” (vv. 10-12). **Slide 5**

The verse Paul quotes here is Genesis 25:23. The Bible says in Genesis 25:21-22 that Rebekah conceived and “the children struggled within her.” These *children* were Jacob and Esau. It would have been as wrong to kill them in the womb as it would have been outside it. Their struggle in the womb was a foreshadow of the conflict between these two brothers years later.

“And the Lord said to her: ‘Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger’” (v. 23). God made that choice before they were born.

But what choice? Calvinists assume that God chose Jacob to be saved and Esau to be damned. But that is not what the Bible says. God chose which twin’s descendants would serve the descendants of the other. The nation that descended from Esau, the Edomites, would serve and the nation that descended from Jacob, the Israelites, would lead. The choice or election in Romans 9:11 is national position, not spiritual state.

Paul states a fact that no Jew could deny about this position. They did nothing to deserve it (Deut. 9:5). The promise was made to Rebekah before they were born, when neither Jacob nor Esau had done any good or evil. That by itself was a rebuke to Jewish arrogance. John the Baptist had warned the Jews not to pride themselves in being Abraham’s seed (Matt. 3:8). But later in John we find them still saying, “Abraham is our father” (John 8:39).

Calvinists argue that Paul’s words “nor having done any good or evil” mean that the eternal destiny of Jacob and Esau and the whole human race has nothing to do with whether we do good or commit evil! But they forget what Paul already said in chapter 2 in verses 6-11!

Not only that, but Jacob and Esau were clearly responsible for their own behavior. Jacob definitely paid for his scheming and deception

when he met his match with his father-in-law Laban and when his sons later deceived him about Joseph. The Bible also says that Esau was evil by choice, not by Calvinistic predestination, in Hebrews 12:16.

But what about the next verse in Romans 9? “As it is written, ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated’” (v. 13). God did not say this to Rebekah. He said this through the prophet Malachi over a thousand years later.

Yes, God said these words in Malachi 1:2-3. But the Lord was talking about the nations that descended from the twins, not the twins themselves. That is clear in verse 3 and 4 where God talks about the Edomites and their territory as a people.

But how could a God who is said to love the world in John 3:16 *hate* Esau? A great commentary is Genesis 29. Verse 30 says Jacob “loved Rachel more than Leah.” Then verse 31 explains what this means: “the Lord saw that Leah was hated.” That is the KJV. The NKJV takes the edge off the words and says “the Lord saw that Leah was unloved.” But it is inconsistent in so doing because the Bible does not say that Leah was unloved. It says she was loved *less*. God loving Jacob and hating Esau is no different from Jesus saying that we must hate those who are closest to us to be his disciples (Luke 14:26). And there the NKJV uses the word *hate*.

Was God unjust when He chose Jacob instead of Esau? That is what Paul asks and then answers in Romans 9:14: “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!” Paul then used two examples from the Old Testament. These two men were on opposite sides of the plan of God for the Hebrew nation, and yet the hand of God worked in both their lives.

First Paul used what God said to Moses to show that God was fair and had every right to make these choices. **Slide 6** “For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion’” (Rom. 9:15).

It is critical that we look at the context of that verse. It is from Exodus 33. Moses wanted assurance that God would be with Him as he led the Israelites to the promised land. He asked the Lord, “Show me Your glory.” Then God said, “I will make all My goodness pass before

you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (vv. 18-19). That is when the Lord passed by Moses and allowed him to see what must have been an astonishing display of the power and glory of God.

That was the mercy and compassion God showed toward Moses. It had nothing to do with forgiveness of sins and it certainly had even less to do with Moses’ eternal destiny. God was compassionate to Moses in his role as leader of the Hebrew nation. He would need great strength and patience to endure, and God gave him a special display of His being to strengthen Moses as he began this tremendously hard task. God did not show Himself to anyone else in the nation like this. It was His right to choose Moses for this work and bless him accordingly.

That is what the next verse in Romans 9 states: “So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (v. 19). Moses did not want to be the leader of the Hebrews. He resisted when God first told him he was the man for the job (Exod. 3-4). Moses did not see the glory of God by His own right. It was a matter of God’s mercy and God’s right as to whom He chose to display His glory. Again, the idea of salvation or damnation is not under consideration here. The emphasis is on the preservation of the nation of Israel which was to bring the Messiah into the world.

Just as God blessed the nation of Israel and showed special favors to men like Jacob and Moses, He chastised Pharaoh to bring about His purposes: **Slide 7** “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth’” (Rom. 9:17).

This is from Exodus 9:16. That verse is one of the clearest and most powerful verses on the providence of God in the Bible. God did not tell Pharaoh to be the king of Egypt. He did not appear to him in a vision or send a prophet to anoint him as ruler. In unseen ways God paved the way and opened the door for this man to be king while He left the free will of everyone involved intact!

God showed His power in Pharaoh when He sent the plagues on Egypt. Pharaoh with all his power, his wealth and even his gods could

not stop these miracles. Numbers 33:4 says that God executed judgment on the gods of Egypt.

As a result, God's name was made known throughout all the earth. When the Israelites finally reached the promised land in Joshua 2, Rahab told two of the Jewish spies, "We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you, when you came up out of Egypt" (Josh. 2:10). Even later when the Philistines heard that the Israelites were carrying the ark of the covenant, they cried out, "Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness" (I Sam. 4:8). God had more than one reason for hardening the heart of Pharaoh.

Paul continues in Romans 9:18, "Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens." He had mercy on Moses to enable him to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt and lead them to the land of promise. He hardened Pharaoh to show his power to the Hebrews and the Egyptians and to spread the news of His glory far beyond the boundaries of the Israelite nation. We dealt with God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in another lesson in this series so I won't repeat that discussion here.

Once more we see that Paul is not saying that God justified Moses and condemned Pharaoh to hell without any choice on their part. Their salvation or condemnation is not the point. The point is the nation of Israel and how God chose and preserved them as a people to bring the Christ into the world. God in His providence used Moses and even an Egyptian king to bring about that purpose.

That brings us to the heart of what Paul says about the potter and the clay. "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?' But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this'?" (Rom. 9:19-20).

There is a very simple yet critical question we must answer as we read these words: Who is raising the objection in these verses? Remember what Paul said in Romans 2: "You are called a Jew" (v. 17) and then he described the typical Jewish mindset of the day. Paul is addressing that same attitude in this part of Romans 9.

This is not an innocent person who is asking the questions in verse 19. The person who says, “Why does he still find fault?” and “For who has resisted his will?” is not an honest person who sincerely wants to know the truth. This is a Jew who thinks like Paul described him in Romans 2:17-20: one who boasted in God, one who knew the law and regarded himself as a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of babes.

Unconverted Jews and even some Jewish Christians tended to look at themselves as Paul described them in chapter 2. Non-Christian Jews obviously argued against the gospel, but some Jews in the church, especially Judaizing teachers, thought of the Jewish people as being above everyone else and were hard to teach. They were still sympathetic toward, proud about, and defensive of their national heritage.

Verse 20 shows this attitude. “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God?” Paul does not say that this person *questioned* God. Many good people in the Bible questioned God—the prophets in the Old Testament and even the Son of God who cried out on the cross “Why?”

But Paul said this person was replying *against* God. The word in Greek is not the usual word for answering someone. That is the word *apokrinomai*. The word in Romans 9:20 translated “reply against” is *antapokrinomai*, from the preposition *anti*, against, and *apokrinomai*, to answer, thus to answer against. Thayer defines it: “to contradict in reply, to answer by contradiction, reply against” and says in Romans 9:20 it means “to altercate, dispute” (p. 49).

The man in Romans 9:19 is not a humble person looking for the right answer. He is an arrogant Jew who is arguing against what Paul said.

That is why Paul responds to this man as he does in verses 20 and 21. He may seem to avoid the man’s questions. He may even appear to be harsh. But remember this simple rule of Bible interpretation: To whom is he speaking?

Paul had already told those with the Jewish mindset the answers to these questions earlier in the book. “Why does God still find fault with the Jews, and who has resisted His will?” The Jews had. They *knew His will* (Rom. 2:18), but they did not obey His will (Rom. 2:21-28). Paul

already showed them that *they had resisted God's will* in chapter 3 where he used their Scriptures to prove they were sinners!

That is why Paul does not directly answer the question. He had already showed them why God found fault with the Jews in chapter 2 and 3.

Here in Romans 9 he asks the Jew with this attitude who he thinks he is to contradict God. Then he asks the question of this study: "Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?" (Rom. 9:20-21).

The key question for us is: What does Paul mean when he says God *made* him like this?

Paul had just talked about God's dealings with the people of Israel. He "made" Moses a vessel of honor while He made Pharaoh a vessel of dishonor in verses 15-18. We have already seen that God did not decide their spiritual state and their eternal destiny. But God did employ both of them for His purpose. God had every right to deal with them and with the Jewish people as He did. **Slide 8**

Paul is still answering the legitimate question in verse 14: "Is there unrighteousness with God?" But even more importantly, he is answering the question of Romans 9:6: Has the word of God concerning the Jewish nation failed? Have all the promises He made and the works He did for Israel been in vain?

His answer is "No." God has kept His word and fulfilled His promises. But He did all this in ways the Jews did not understand because they of their unbelief. Paul later says in Romans 11:7 that they were blinded. It is this mindset that Paul is responding to in Romans 9 when he talks about the potter and the clay.

Jews were interested in justifying themselves—"Why does He still find fault?" But Paul is setting forth God's righteousness in this book—God's plan or system of making man righteous through the gospel, through faith and not works of the law as the Jews thought.

When Paul says God makes one vessel to honor and another to dishonor, he cannot mean that human beings are as passive as a ball of

clay in spiritual decisions. We have explained in another lesson that Calvinists press the language in these references far beyond their meaning in the context. King Manasseh “made Judah sin with his idols” (II Kings 21:11). Did the people of Judah make a choice? Jeroboam “made Israel sin” (I Kings 14:16). Did the Israelites have free will in this? The man who unscripturally divorces his wife in Matthew 5:32 “causes her to commit adultery.” Did she have a choice? Of course she did.

In the same way, God formed and made Jacob and Moses and even Pharaoh and the Jewish people as a whole in conjunction with their free will, not against or without it.

This is not the only time the Bible uses the illustration of the potter and the clay. God said to the Jews, ““Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' Or shall your handiwork say, 'He has no hands'?” (Isaiah 45:9).

The context is God’s prophecy that Cyrus the king of Persia will let the Jews return home to Jerusalem. God is the One “Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, “You shall be built,” And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid" (Isa. 44:28).

God delivered this prophecy through Isaiah over 200 years before it happened. Cyrus, of course, had not even been born. Postmodern Bible commentators say this must have been written by someone who lived in the time of the captivity in Babylon, not by Isaiah.

Why? God says in Isaiah 46:9-11 that He sees the future before it happens. One of the main themes of Isaiah is that God is superior to the gods the Jews had been guilty of serving. Many times in this book God reminds the Jews that He created the heavens and the earth. These other gods did not. He tells them that they know He can foretell the future. But these other gods cannot. When liberal theologians disconnect Isaiah 40-66 from the rest of the book, they violate the thematic nature of the book which they claim to understand so well.

But the problem during the time of the Babylonian captivity was that there were some Jews that questioned whether God could bring

them home. Some had grown weary after being in Babylon for so long. In the end they were in that strange land for 70 years. But they also had enemies they feared. And when God said *Cyrus the king of Assyria* would let them go free, they could not rationalize how this could happen. That is why God says what He does about striving with Him and asking Him what He is doing in Isaiah 45:9.

In the rest of Isaiah 45 God assures them that He will accomplish what He said through Cyrus. If He can create and uphold the heavens, He can certainly bring the Jews back to their homeland (v. 12, 18). He “hides” Himself in that He hides His power and plans until the right time (v. 15). That is actually what God refers to in that well-known passage in Isaiah 55:9: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways.”

This is the same application Paul makes in Romans 9. The Jewish idea of how God should work with their nation was not God’s idea. The Jews had plans for their nation and its future, but God had other plans. He had that right. He was the One who formed their nation to begin with. He was the reason they still existed when Paul wrote the book of Romans. But they had no right to object to how God dealt with their nation any more than clay has a right to argue with the potter.

An even more revealing use of the image of the potter and the clay is in the book of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 18 **Slide 9** the Bible says, “1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: 2 “Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear My words.” 3 Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something at the wheel.

4 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.

5 Then 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!

7 The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,

8 if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it.

9 And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it,

10 if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

11 "Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord: "Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good."

12 And they said, 'That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart.'"

The house of Israel, God said, was like clay in the hands of the potter. But what does this illustration mean? It shows that how God shapes them depends on how they shape themselves. If God warns that He will destroy a nation and that nation turns from its evil, God said He will not destroy them. Notice that God said *the nation turns* from evil. That was their choice. God did not make them repent. They *chose* to repent.

The same was true of a nation that became evil. God said that if He says He will build and plant a kingdom and that nation does evil, then He will take away the good He said He would do for them. Again, the choice was theirs.

Both the threat of punishment and the promise of blessing were conditional.

The Jews themselves were an example. God said in verse 11 that He was about to do to them what He said in verse 7—pull down and destroy it. That is what the book of Jeremiah is about. God is warning the Jewish people that the Babylonians will destroy their place unless they repent and turn from their evil ways. They had a choice!

But they refused time and again in this book. That is what we read in Jeremiah 18:12. They said it was hopeless to repent so they intended to follow their own heart.

It is impossible to fit Calvinism into the language used in Jeremiah 18. And, it is no wonder that Calvin mentioned Jeremiah 18 in his

commentary on Romans 9, but he said it really did not correspond to Paul's illustration of the potter and the clay like Isaiah 45 does. That is a convenient way to keep from dealing with the plain language of Jeremiah.

So in Romans 9 the illustration of the potter and the clay shows how God used the nation of Israel to accomplish his purpose in bringing the Messiah and His church into the world. He carefully worked with Jacob in spite of his flaws. He was especially gracious to the meek man Moses. He dealt with an arrogant ruler of Egypt with a firm hand. And God hardened the hearts of the Jews in the same way that He hardened Pharaoh's heart. They rejected the words and the miracles of His only begotten Son and crucified Him, and in that sense they were like clay in the hands of the potter because they were accomplishing God's eternal purpose by their own stubborn will.

That is the application Paul makes in Romans 9:22-24: "What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?"

The Greek begins with the words *ei de* which literally means "But if" or "Moreover if." It is hard to put this into English. That is why some translations use the words "What if." But the flow of the passage seems to give the main idea.

Paul is responding to the objection in verse 19: "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" Paul says first of all who are you to argue with God. Then He says the potter—God—has the right to make men for His purposes. Now in verses 22-24 he raises a question that both explains the issue and rebukes the person asking the question.

If God chose to endure the evil of the vessels of wrath, even though He was willing and able to destroy them, then that is his business. These vessels of wrath are the disobedient Jews. God was willing to punish them before. He was willing to show His wrath but He waited. He was willing to make His power known by punishing them to the fullest just as he said to Pharaoh in verse 17, "For this very purpose I

have raised you up, that I may show My power in you.” But he bore with them in their wicked ways for hundreds of years.

These Jews were vessels of wrath—God’s wrath. That is why Paul said in I Thessalonians 2:16 that the wrath of God had come upon them to the uttermost. That was particularly true of the Jews in the first century. The book of Matthew is an excellent commentary on this point, especially Matthew chapters 21-24. Jesus told them that all the righteous blood that had been shed on the earth was coming down on them (Matt. 23:35).

Jesus taught these people and worked miracles before them, but they refused to believe. That was their choice. But in rejecting Him they became more hardened in their hearts. They became worse than they were before Jesus came (Matt. 12:45). In that sense—because God sent Jesus to them—God hardened their already hardened hearts just as He hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Paul was talking about this very thing when He said “whom He wills He hardens.”

That is how God worked with the Jewish people just as a potter works with a lump of clay. Because these vessels of wrath turned away from God, they were fit for destruction. That is exactly what happened to them when God poured out His fury upon the city of Jerusalem with the worst suffering the world had ever known or ever will experience (Matt. 24:21).

And God had a reason for not destroying them earlier. He delayed making His wrath known against the Jews so that He could make His glory known to both Jews and Gentiles in the church. They are the “vessels of mercy” in verse 23. These vessels are both Jews and Gentiles in the church. This is what Paul said in verse 24: “Even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”

The hardened Jews rejected the works and preaching of Jesus and the apostles. They were vessels of God’s wrath. Jews and Gentiles in the church received the gospel. They were vessels of His mercy. God had prepared them beforehand for His glory in verse 23. Ephesians 1:4 says He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.

The illustration of the potter and the clay is about God’s plan for the church. That is what he continues to unfold in chapters 10 and 11.

God did not want His chosen people to fall, but because of their fall salvation came to the Gentiles. And because the Gentiles received God's offer, Paul's hope and prayer was that the Jews who were jealous of these Gentiles might be motivated by envy to look deeper into the gospel and eventually be saved.

Who but God acting as the potter of the clay could have thought of such a plan and seen it through? No wonder Paul wrote as he ended this great section in Romans 11:33: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"