

Objects of Wrath, Created for Destruction

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

November 6, 2022 – PM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Romans 9:1-24

I think it's pretty clear from these opening verses: Paul's struggle in chapters 9 through 11 is a deeply personal struggle. Everything he will write in these next three chapters is an attempt to address the sorrow in his own heart, an attempt to address his own pain.

Where does the pain come from? In Romans 8, Paul is not in pain. He's ecstatic! Paul has just finished proclaiming the glory of the Salvation we have in Jesus. "There is therefore now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" "In all things he works for our good!" "There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the Love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!" Nothing can stop God's promises, says Romans 8.

But no sooner are the words out of his pen and on paper, his mind goes to an exception that seems to call into question everything he's said. His mind goes to the Jews. It's fine for him to say so boldly that nothing can shake God's promises, but what about the very obvious fact that the people of the promise, the Jewish people, have rejected the messiah. The Jewish people are the ones to whom God has made all these great promises and now they seem separated from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. The vast majority of them want nothing to do with Jesus. For Paul this isn't just a tough theological problem, this problem is personal. This is his family he's talking about. These are his friends, his old schoolmates, his buddies from the days when he went to University. Paul is so upset by this exception that he says he'd even give up his own salvation for their sake. And any parent who has ever seen a child walk away from faith knows exactly where Paul is coming from. In the rest of chapters 9-11 Paul addresses this question head on. Why don't God's promises seem to be working for the Jews?

Let's keep reading: Romans 9:6-18. "It is not as though God's word had failed." "Even though it looks bad, it's not as though all of God's promises to Israel are over," says Paul. And he proceeds to launch into something of a defense of God's promise.

'Look,' says Paul, 'God's promise to Israel hasn't failed because not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.' Israel has never been defined by blood descent. Just having Abraham's genetic material does not make you part of God's family, part of the true Israel. There are all sorts of instances where only some of the people related by blood were chosen as children of the promise, while the others went in a different direction. Both Ishmael and Isaac were blood children, but only Isaac was chosen for the promise. Both Jacob and Esau were blood children, but only Jacob was chosen for the promise. So if a whole group of people who are Israel's family by blood don't embrace the promise, it's not like we haven't seen this before. The true Israel, the Israel of the promise, has never been about blood; it's always been about God's choosing. And God chooses some to show compassion and carry the promise, and he sometimes chooses to harden hearts. Like Pharaoh, says Paul. Remember who God hardened Pharaoh's heart for the sake of showing his glory? That's how it works. The true people of God are defined not by their blood, they're not defined by their performance; they're defined as the ones whom God chose.

Now, there are a couple of levels in which Paul's words are controversial here. First: notice who he's comparing the Jewish people to here. In these 13 verses he is comparing the Jewish people to Ishmael, Esau and Pharaoh. Paul is comparing the Jews to three people who, in their own stories, are considered enemies. They are being identified with three people who they set themselves against! You remember how in Acts, Paul would always start his preaching by going to a synagogue and how sometimes the Jews there would become so angry that they would try and string him up? Maybe this gives you some idea as to why. "You know who you people remind me of? Ishmael! Esau! Pharaoh!" This is not how to win friends and influence people.

And second, Paul's words here would raise some obvious questions about fairness. "Wait a minute here Paul. So you're saying that all my lapsed friends, my brother who won't come to church anymore, my sister who has walked away from faith, are like Esau. That's happening just because they haven't been chosen? You're saying: God chooses whomever he wants and hardens whomever he wants, *but how on earth can anyone be blamed for disobedience? How can anyone be blamed for the fact that God didn't choose them?*

Paul, it doesn't seem fair, and it's not very comforting." These are the questions we take to the next part of our reading.

Read Romans 9:19-24. Wow. If Paul's words raised some initial questions in the previous section we read, this one just multiplies them. The last section left us wondering: if my loved ones, if the Jews are left out simply because God didn't choose them, how is that fair? And to answer that Paul says: "Don't ask impertinent questions." You are the clay, he is the potter. The clay doesn't talk back to the potter. And the potter can do whatever he wants with the clay. It's kind of a show stopping argument.

The interesting thing is however Paul doesn't stop asking questions. He could have, but at some level he isn't satisfied with the God can choose whomever argument and he digs even deeper into God's ways. *What if*, says Paul, what if there are some people who are created to be, meant to be objects of wrath made for destruction. People like Pharaoh who are raised up as God's enemies and made an example of so that God can show his glory. *What if* God makes some people who are left to walk in the darkness, and God puts up with these people as a way to more vigorously display his mercy toward the people he has chosen, toward the elect. These objects of wrath, created for destruction create a vivid contrast to the gracious salvation of the chosen ones. If the salvation story is like a painting, then God paints these people as shading, a dark background that helps make the light places stand out more brightly, shading that makes the glorious places more noticeable. As I said last week, this is the passage in Scripture from which we derive the doctrine of reprobation. For those of you who weren't here, the doctrine of reprobation says that God chooses from eternity who will be saved, and, by default, from eternity, he leaves people out. These people who are left out are the objects of wrath made for destruction.

Now this doctrine makes a lot of folks uncomfortable. So let me make a few observations here. First, let me draw your attention to the two words I mentioned last week, words that I think are very important in this passage, two words that have been downplayed in the way we've always read it. The two words are "*What if*." Paul isn't saying: I know how God works...let me tell you who God works: he creates people to be objects of wrath made for destruction. No, Paul is saying, *what if* this is how it goes. Maybe this is what's happening. I realize I'm treading the ground of profound mystery here, but perhaps... Paul is not saying thus saith the Lord; he's saying *what if*. He says it twice in these 5 verses. Paul is leaving room for us to argue with him here. I think that means we don't have to accept what Paul says in this little section as doctrine, we can argue about it some. And if I were sitting down with Paul on this matter, if we were sitting down for a drink and some theology at the local coffee shop, I think I might argue some. I would say, Paul, I'm not sure God creates people just to destroy them, with the intention of destroying them. I know he hardened pharaoh's heart. I see your point there. But Paul, Pharaoh had already proven himself an enemy of God and his people when God did his hardening, he wasn't an innocent soul. And pharaoh is only one person. Even if God hardened pharaoh's heart in Exodus, does it follow from that every single time someone disobeys, it's God hardening their heart? I'm not sure. (And, for what it's worth, Paul isn't satisfied about where his argument ends in verse 24, as we will see later)

A second thing to notice about these hard words: When Paul calls some people objects made for destruction, is he talking about destruction that will happen in this life, or is he talking about eternal destruction? Clearly Esau and Pharaoh and Ishmael were in some sense "Objects of wrath" in this life. They became foils for God's promises in this life. But did all that continue into eternity? Did God intend their separation from him and opposition to him to be eternal? Maybe. Maybe not. We just don't know. When Paul says that these three men were objects of wrath created for destruction, he's talking about their role in their earthly life; he doesn't say anything about their eternal state.

A third qualifier to these hard words: Paul talks about God creating a person as an object of wrath made for destruction, and he gives Pharaoh as an example of that. There's one more person in Scripture who fits that bill though. Can you think of who that is? Who else was put in this world to bear the wrath of God? It's Jesus. Jesus came to this world, was born into this world so that he could be an object of wrath. His destiny was always the destruction of the cross. He came to take all the hate and anger and misery on himself. That's what he was chosen to do. I wonder how that might make Jesus feel about all those who have been in that boat with him. I wonder how that might make Jesus feel about all those who for whatever reason have not been chosen to experience the joy of God in this life?

This is the end of our passage as it's written in your bulletins. But it's not the end of Paul's thinking on the matter of his alienated brothers. Paul doesn't stop at verse 24. The canons stop at verse 24. They state the doctrine of reprobation and then they say "No more questions!" They draw the curtain across the discussion. Paul doesn't do that. He goes on for two more chapters, because he has more to say and, I think, because he's not satisfied with his own speculations thus far. He doesn't finally want simply to say about his friends and family: "*Well, they're not part of the chosen. They are made for destruction. C'est la vie!*" He wants to say more! I can't read both the following chapters, but I will read two passages from chapter 11 to give you a sense where Paul ends with the discussion of his friends who have rejected Jesus.

Read Romans 11:11-12; 25-32. So in the end, Paul's old friends, his schoolmates, his Jewish brothers and sisters who have rejected Jesus are not objects of wrath made for destruction. They are beloved, for the sake of the patriarchs, for the sake of all God's investment in them. In the end their disobedience will not last forever. The gentiles used to be disobedient to God, but they've been brought in by grace, and Paul sees the same thing happening to his Jewish friends – they will be brought back too. They will become jealous of the grace the Gentiles have received and they will return. So, the old promises to them haven't failed, the gift and calling of God are irrevocable – don't give up! God isn't done. Paul in effect comes back to where he began this discussion, he comes back to the end of Romans 8 – nothing can separate us!

Now, there are few parts of the Bible where the meaning and weight of Paul's words are more hotly debated than these last sentences of Romans 11. You read the commentaries and every word is examined in all its nuance and weight. I can't go in to all that. Honestly I didn't have time to study all of that. But, wherever you come down on the finer points, I don't think there is any question that broadly speaking, Paul is holding out strong hope for most, if not all of his Jewish friends. I don't think there's any question that he sees God's mercy catching up with most of the people whose disbelief he laments in the first verses of chapter 9.

Then in the last verse of all, the amazing verse 32, Paul becomes suddenly expansive. His horizons open up. I don't know how many of you have seen the movie the Shawshank Redemption, but there is a great scene in that movie where the main character Andy breaks into the Warden's office at Shawshank Prison and plays an aria from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

In fact, he broadcasts the Aria out over the entire prison yard, so all the prisoners suddenly hear this sweet music. When they hear the music, all the people trapped in their grey misery of their prison suddenly stop what they're doing, and their heads tip up in wonderment taking in this beautiful sound that temporarily lifts them above their grey life. When the film-maker films that scene he does something interesting: he has the camera pull back and up above the prisoners above the prison walls. Up and beyond.

Paul does something similar in verse 32: God has imprisoned *all* in disobedience, so that he might have mercy on them *all*. Paul doesn't use the word 'Israel' anymore, he uses the word 'all'. It's like his camera lifts from the walls of Jerusalem out across the plains of Judah across the Jordan. And for a moment we can see out to the Nile delta where hard old pharaoh used to live and down through the deserts of Africa where the Bedouin fires burn and up now past the borders of the empire across the forests of Europe where barbarian tribes gather. Paul says all and for a moment we can see the expanses of China and the shoreline of India and across oceans to the jungles of South America and American plains still swarming with buffalo, Paul says all and for a second we can see all the peoples of the world huddled around their fires on a thousand shores. And we wonder: how big is that 'all'. Does Paul just mean some of the Jewish people? Does he mean all of the Jewish people? or does he mean something stronger and grander and larger still?

I don't know what Paul means. I don't think Paul knows what he means, I don't think Paul knows how big 'all' really is. I do think that for a moment Paul sees across the breadth of this world God loves and he imagines God's grace being bigger and stranger than he could dare believe. And Paul is so overwhelmed that he sings his own Aria: *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given him a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him, and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*