

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 9: 19-21

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. This week, we will read Romans 9:19–33. Today, we will read verse 19-21.

Romans chapters 1–8 speak of personal salvation: from receiving the judicial redemption accomplished by Christ, to experiencing the organic salvation daily, being sanctified day by day, until the coming of Christ, when we will obtain the adoption as sons and be manifested in glory.

We have spent four months reading through chapters 1–8. Now, chapters 9–16 of Romans deal with corporate salvation. The gospel began with the Jews. The first church was in Jerusalem—a church primarily composed of Jews. Later, Paul received the commission as the apostle to the Gentiles, bringing the gospel to the Gentile lands and establishing many churches among them. When the gospel prospered among the Gentiles, the Jews, however, fell behind.

Paul sought to understand the will of God and realized that God had temporarily set aside the Jews. This caused Paul to have great sorrow and continual grief in his heart. He knew this was under God's sovereignty. By diligently seeking and receiving divine revelation, he came to understand God's will, purpose, and plan. Yet, he also knew that he had no right to question why God acted this way. Therefore, when Paul speaks of corporate salvation, he begins from the sovereignty of God.

In church history, two major schools of thought emerged. The Calvinist school emphasizes God's absolute sovereignty, while the Arminian–Wesleyan school emphasizes human free will. In their theological debates, both sides pushed their positions to the extreme and even established denominations to propagate their theological ideas.

Personally, I have no interest in taking part in such theological disputes. I am more concerned with how to help the saints apply and experience God's word in daily life. I believe that in Paul's understanding, God's sovereignty and man's free will complement each other—they are not opposites.

In order of priority, God's sovereignty comes first, because His will, purpose, and plan were determined before the foundation of the world. Yet, God still fully respects man's free will—man can freely choose how to respond to His sovereignty.

Take salvation as an example: in His sovereignty, God sends many people to preach the gospel to us. However, God never forces us to believe or not to believe. We are free to decide—this is our free will. Of course, God already knows the decision each person will make. Thus, we see that some people hear the gospel many times until they finally believe, while others hear it and yet the gospel becomes to them “the aroma of death leading to death.” This is what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:16.

In Romans 8:29, Paul also tells us that God predestines according to His foreknowledge. To further explain this, in Romans 9:6–18, Paul uses several well-known Old Testament examples to show us that between God's foreknowledge and His predestination, there are at least three distinct steps:

1. The promise in God's sovereignty,
2. The choice in God's sovereignty, and
3. The mercy in God's sovereignty.

In this process, man's free will always plays a responsive role. Those who receive mercy are filled with gratitude, realizing how unworthy they are to have obtained such compassion and mercy. But the unbelievers rise up to challenge God.

Paul concludes in Romans 9:18, “Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.” At first glance, this seems arbitrary or even unfair. Yet those who challenge God forget that their increasing hardness of heart results from neglecting God's promise and disregarding His will. Because of their pride and indifference, they are not chosen, and thus have no share in His mercy. In facing

such people, Paul answers directly from the standpoint that God, as the Creator, has absolute sovereignty. Saints might well ponder carefully why Paul, when addressing these challengers, emphasizes God's absolute sovereignty — it seems Paul's intent is to shut their mouths.

Verse 19: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?’”

This follows immediately after verse 18: “He hardens whom He wills.” Paul knows that unbelievers will surely raise this question. The phrase “You will say to me” refers precisely to those unbelievers who, upon hearing of God's sovereignty and finding themselves excluded from mercy, refuse to accept it and rise up to question God: “If it is all God's sovereignty, how can He still find fault with man? Who can resist His will?”

The word “will”, here translates the Greek *boulema*, referring to God's intention or purpose. In verse 11, however, the word translated “purpose” (*prothesis*) means a predetermined plan—a specific goal within God's will. But here, *boulema* denotes the final decision of the Triune God, the outcome of divine counsel within the Godhead.

God's will cannot be altered, nor can it be resisted by man. So, if God hardens someone, and man cannot resist, how can God still blame man? If it is God who caused the hardness, then God should take responsibility—this is the reasoning of unbelievers. Dear brothers and sisters, does this sound familiar? Even today, people often ask: “If there is a God, why is the world such a mess? Why are there wars, hatred, riots, and injustice everywhere? Can there really be a God?”

Man always forgets his own responsibility. Those who refuse to acknowledge God fail to recognize even His general grace. God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good alike. In winter, the sunlight shines; in summer, the sunlight also shines. How can a person love the winter sun but curse the summer sun?

Moreover, men not only ignore God's general grace—they also reject His special grace. Anyone who hears the gospel and accepts Jesus Christ as his Savior becomes one who receives mercy. But those who reject the salvation of Jesus Christ become hardened.

I believe that in our modern society, most people have heard the gospel many times. This shows that in His sovereignty, God continues to send messengers to proclaim the good news. Yet in their free will, people can choose how to respond—and therefore must bear their own responsibility.

However, Paul does not argue from this human perspective. He directly points out that those who raise such questions have no standing to ask them at all.

Verse 20: “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?’”

“O man, who are you?” Paul sharply rebukes those who challenge God's sovereignty. Who are you? What position or status do you have to question God? How dare you speak back to Him? God is the Creator of the universe, and you are merely one of His creatures. How can that which is created question its Creator? Only those who fail to recognize their identity and position would say, “Why me? Why was I made this way?”

God is the One who works all things according to His own will. He does not need to explain anything to man. His will is the standard of all things, and His sovereignty is the answer to all questions.

If man humbles himself, he will see the works of God. If he seeks further, he may, like Moses, come to understand some of God's principles. But man can neither know nor guess at the motives of God's actions. Only when God chooses to reveal Himself can man know Him. Paul makes it clear—man has no right to question God.

Then Paul gives an illustration everyone can understand.

Verse 21: “Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?”

Paul compares God to a potter and man to vessels. From human understanding, the potter obviously has full authority. From the same lump of clay, he can make one vessel for honorable use and another for common use. The same material may become a beautiful vase for flowers or a humble pot for waste. The potter acts according to his will. Can the vessel talk back to him, saying, “Why did you make me like this?”

Paul’s purpose here is to silence the mouths of unbelievers, showing that the Creator owes no explanation to His creation. Since Romans 9 emphasizes God’s sovereignty, Paul does not elaborate further. Yet his illustration is deeply thought-provoking.

In other letters, Paul also likens man to vessels. For example, in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” We are earthen vessels made of clay. In ourselves, we have little worth. Yet as vessels, our purpose is to contain God. Once we believe in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells within us—we then have a treasure in our earthen vessel.

This treasure gives the vessel its value, though others may not see it. When our vessel passes through sufferings and is broken, the treasure within is manifested—full of glory and life-supplying power. Therefore, Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 4:16, “Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.”

In 2 Timothy 2:20–21, Paul further explains: “But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.” Here, Paul shifts from emphasizing God’s sovereignty to stressing man’s responsibility.

The “great house” refers to the church. Within it are all kinds of vessels—some of gold and silver, others of wood and clay. Those who purify themselves, turning away from unclean things, will become vessels for honor—holy and useful to the Master. Gold signifies God’s nature; silver signifies Christ’s redemption. By creation, we are all earthen vessels. But if we are willing to be cleansed—on the one hand receiving Christ’s redemption, and on the other participating in God’s nature within our soul—we will have gold and silver wrought into us. When the outer clay vessel is broken, the gold and silver within are manifested, and we become precious vessels fit for the Master’s use.

At the end of this age, the church will indeed be a great house. All who are truly saved are vessels of gold or silver. Yet there are also those who have not truly believed, still mingled among the believers; thus, there remain vessels of wood and clay. Wood signifies man’s natural life, and clay signifies his earthly nature. Such people, though among the believers, still cling to earthly things and act according to their natural disposition. They do not know redemption and therefore have no silver, nor have they partaken of God’s divine nature—there is no gold in them. They are wooden and clay vessels—common, dishonorable vessels that God cannot use.

For the unbelievers who challenge God, Paul shows that the created being has no ground to question the Creator. But to the saints, Paul exhorts: Cleanse yourselves and pursue holiness, that you may become vessels of gold and silver—vessels for honor, sanctified and useful to the Lord.

Beloved brothers and sisters, we must recognize that God is sovereign. In our free will, the only right response to His sovereignty is obedience. Then we will experience Christ’s redemption and have God’s nature wrought into us, becoming precious vessels for His use.

Let us pray together: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You! Before the foundation of the world, You chose us, and in time You sent Your servants to preach the gospel to us, that we might receive grace and be saved—what a great mercy this is! We are saved under Your sovereignty, and we also desire to be sanctified under Your sovereignty—to become vessels for honor, fit for Your use.

Thank You for preparing all kinds of environments in our daily life, so that our outward man may be broken, and the treasure within may be manifested in its preciousness and glory. Help us to realize that today's light affliction is but for a moment, working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

Grant us a heart of obedience, that in all things we may submit to the circumstances You have arranged for us. We are assured that You will provide everything we need, for Your purpose is to make us holy. Bless our daily life. We pray in the Holy Name of Jesus Christ.