No One’s Destiny is Set in Stone

Romans 9:10-33

Last week in our study of Romans Chapter 9 I shared with you that the Apostle Paul’s example of Jacob and Esau was about the nation of Israel and Edom. The scriptures say that Jacob and Esau struggled with each other even while they were still in the womb. But this struggle was not about who would be saved and who wouldn’t be saved. And it was not about some people having the ability to respond to the gospel and others being unable to respond. In fact, when understood correctly, it is demonstrates the opposite. Being born into a favorable position, in life, does not take away a personal responsibility to put faith in Jesus. And being born outside the covenant people of Israel, did not negate the possibility of trusting God and therefore being called and loved as His own. Paul is teaching that even though we all have different lots in life, we are all accountable for our own response to God.

God shows mercy to anyone He chooses and when we see His mercy we can either harden our hearts to it or respond in faith. Let’s pick back up in Romans 9 beginning with verse 11:

**11**But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God. (This message shows that God chooses people according to his own purposes; **12**he calls people, but not according to their good or bad works.) She was told, “Your older son will serve your younger son.”[[g](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28129g)] **13**In the words of the Scriptures, “I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau.”[[h](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28130h)]

**14**Are we saying, then, that God was unfair? Of course not! **15**For God said to Moses,

“I will show mercy to anyone I choose,
    and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.”[[i](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT" \l "fen-NLT-28132i" \o "See footnote i)]

**16**So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it.

**17**For the Scriptures say that God told Pharaoh, “I have appointed you for the very purpose of displaying my power in you and to spread my fame throughout the earth.”[[j](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28134j)] **18**So you see, God chooses to show mercy to some, and he chooses to harden the hearts of others so they refuse to listen.

**19**Well then, you might say, “Why does God blame people for not responding? Haven’t they simply done what he makes them do?”

**20**No, don’t say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, “Why have you made me like this?” **21**When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn’t he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into? **22**In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction. **23**He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory. **24**And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles.

Some say that Pharaoh was created for the very purpose of refusing God so that God could display His glory. But wouldn’t it have also displayed God’s glory if Pharaoh had repented?

I’m sure that fame would have spread throughout the earth as well.

This passage is actually saying that God chose to display His **mercy** to Pharaoh. In the first six of the ten plagues that happened in Egypt the scriptures say that “Pharoah hardened his heart.” It wasn’t until the last four that we are told God hardened his heart. It is true that Pharaoh was destined for destruction, just like all of us are destined for destruction. But just like us, Pharaoh had opportunity to respond in faith to God’s mercy.

Figuratively, Pharaoh was a clay pot that was made to throw garbage into, but when God showed Him mercy he had the opportunity to be refashioned into a “jar made for decoration.”

Wait, wait, wait, you might be saying. How can the clay have anything to do with what the Potter is making? I don’t know if I fully understand, but Jeremiah 18 helps us to understand the analogy a little better. The prophet Jeremiah is being commissioned by God to give a message to Jerusalem:

**18**The Lord gave another message to Jeremiah. He said, **2**“Go down to the potter’s shop, and I will speak to you there.” **3**So I did as he told me and found the potter working at his wheel. **4**But the jar he was making did not turn out as he had hoped, so he crushed it into a lump of clay again and started over.

**5**Then the Lord gave me this message: **6**“O Israel, can I not do to you as this potter has done to his clay? As the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand. **7**If I announce that a certain nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, **8**but then that nation renounces its evil ways, I will not destroy it as I had planned. **9**And if I announce that I will plant and build up a certain nation or kingdom, **10**but then that nation turns to evil and refuses to obey me, I will not bless it as I said I would.

**11**“Therefore, Jeremiah, go and warn all Judah and Jerusalem. Say to them, ‘This is what the Lord says: I am planning disaster for you instead of good. So turn from your evil ways, each of you, and do what is right.’”

**12**But the people replied, “Don’t waste your breath. We will continue to live as we want to, stubbornly following our own evil desires.”

The beginnings of people and nations are established by God. However, the destinies of people and nations are based on their response to God’s mercy.

Jacob and Esau didn’t have any control over their birth order or the type of mercy and favor God would show them. They did, however, have control over how they would respond to the favor and the blessings that God had showed them.

Understand, then, that Paul is trying to help his fellow Israelites understand that their eternal destiny is in their own hands. They are actually in a very similar situation as they were in when Jeremiah visited the potter’s house. The book of Romans was written sometime between 51 and 57 CE and it seems that the apostle is warning his Jewish brothers and sisters that destruction was coming if they didn’t trust that Jesus was their Messiah. Paul uses a quote from Isaiah to warn of the impending destruction of Jerusalem.

**27**And concerning Israel, Isaiah the prophet cried out,

“Though the people of Israel are as numerous as the sand of the seashore,
    only a remnant will be saved.
**28**For the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth
    quickly and with finality.”[[m](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28145m)]

**29**And Isaiah said the same thing in another place:

“If the Lord of Heaven’s Armies
    had not spared a few of our children,
we would have been wiped out like Sodom,
    destroyed like Gomorrah.”[[n](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28146n)]

Just as the early Israelites didn’t listen to Isaiah, so Paul’s contemporaries didn’t listen to Him and God visited His judgement on Jerusalem between 63 and 70 CE. The Historian Josephus claims that 1.1 million people were killed during the siege of Jerusalem. And many more were enslaved or killed afterward. Was this just simply Israel’s destiny?

It was, if they didn’t turn to Jesus and instead trusted in themselves. As Paul finished Romans 9:

**30**What does all this mean? Even though the Gentiles were not trying to follow God’s standards, they were made right with God. And it was by faith that this took place. **31**But the people of Israel, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded. **32**Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law[[o](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28149o)] instead of by trusting in him. They stumbled over the great rock in their path. **33**God warned them of this in the Scriptures when he said,

“I am placing a stone in Jerusalem[[p](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28150p)] that makes people stumble,
    a rock that makes them fall.
But anyone who trusts in him
    will never be disgraced.”[[q](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+9-11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28150q)]

**Anyone** who trusts in Jesus (The Lord who Saves) will never be disgraced.

And anyone who trusts in themselves is destined for destruction. As Ephesians says:

**2**Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. **2**You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=ephesians+2&version=NLT#fen-NLT-29192a)] He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. **3**All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.

This is all people’s destiny, but it is a changeable destiny, because…

**4**But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, **5**that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!) **6**For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. **7**So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

**8**God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. **9**Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. **10**For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Which kind of pot do you want to be?

The one who tries to boast about themselves?

Or the one who boasts in God’s mercy and saving grace?

God chose to allow us to be born as clay pots that were destined for destruction and He also gives us the choice to be re-born and remade by His hands for His glory.

Don’t stumble over Jesus. When you see evidence of God’s mercy don’t take it for granted, understand it as a reason to put your faith in Him. No matter how blessed our life is we are all born into the world destined for destruction. But thankfully no one’s destiny is set in stone. Yes, it is true that God knows the end from the beginning. He knows those who will put their faith in Him and those who will harden their hearts to His message of salvation. But He mercifully leaves the choice of life or death up to every one of us. Just as Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 30:

**15**“Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. **16**For I command you this day to love the Lord your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy.

**17**“But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods, **18**then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live a long, good life in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.

For Israel, at the time, this was speaking with regards to a temporal blessing and a temporal well-being.

The choice to put our trust in Jesus, however, is the choice between eternal life and death.

As Jesus once said…

“I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never die.” John 11:25

Today what do you choose?