



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2005  
by Mark Ashton

10p

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Romans chapter 9:19-33

**Don't Trip Up!**

**Introduction: The Joy and the Anguish of the Gospel**

Paul's letter to the Christian believers in Rome reached something of a climax back in chapter 8, as he proclaimed that nothing can separate us from the love of God. But that joy and that confidence are immediately jolted in chapter 9, by the thought of 'What, then, about the **Jewish** people?' Were they not the ones on whom God had set His love? So how can it be that they are rejecting God's Son Jesus wholesale and so being themselves rejected by God after all His amazing promises to them? And that thought touched Paul on a raw nerve. Where our passage today began *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"* (v 19), we are in the middle of a passionate response. It is not cold logic, nor calmly reasoned argument: In these verses, 10 rhetorical questions follow one another in quick succession. Paul is upset: see how the chapter began: *I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel* (9:1-4a).

Paul is distressed by the Jews' rejection of Jesus; but he is also perturbed by the attitude of the person who thinks this might be a reason for passing judgement on God. Our passage is an impassioned plea by Paul for us to change our attitude to God. Great as his concern is for his unbelieving fellow-countrymen, the Jews, Paul has an even greater concern for the character of God. He cannot bear to think of God being misunderstood, or looked down on, or despised by human beings. So his first point is:

**1) Watch your attitude!**

(vv 19-21)

(Paul has been asserting God's Sovereignty, His absolute rights rule over human beings: *Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden* (v 18).)

*One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?* (vv 19-21).

You see, if there is a God, He is the Maker of the human race. Now, you may not know God for yourself at the moment; but you must realise that, if you are ever going to come to know Him, it will have to be as the Being Who made you; and not as a Being whom you have brought into existence by your own decision to believe in Him. Does that make sense? We all can have that idea: that God doesn't really exist, until we decide He does. That our decision authenticates Him. But the creature cannot demand that the Creator gives answers on the basis of the creature's ideas. *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"* (v 20). It is not that those questions in verse 19 cannot be answered, as that they should not be asked—or at least not in that tone of voice. As the cricket season is upon us again, perhaps a cricketing illustration may be allowed: One friend, when bowling

in a school cricket match got the opposing batsman absolutely plumb leg-before-wicket, turned and shrieked at the umpire, “OW WAS THAT?” “Not Out!” said the umpire. The next ball had exactly the same result, and my friend screamed in an even more demented manner. “Not Out!” said the umpire, and as my friend walked back past him to bowl again the umpire added softly, “Nor will he ever be while you appeal in that manner!” The third ball achieved the same result yet again, but this time, my friend said calmly, “How was



**Illustration 1**

that?” and up went the umpire’s finger, which (for the non-cricketers among us) signifies the successful dismissal of the batsman. [The nature of Test Cricket would be transformed by the application of such wisdom, I think.] And some questions do need to be asked in a reverent tone. As human beings, we cannot call God to account as though He were the product of our reason [Illustration 1]. It’s not like this, is it? Human



**Illustration 2**

reason cannot actually grasp the God Who created it, and surely it is only reasonable to concede that [Illustration 2]? When a human being contemplates the existence and character of God, he or she is considering something infinitely bigger than ourselves. It is like using a telescope [Illustration 3], rather than a microscope [Illustration 4].

Don’t let’s have that microscope attitude of mind that tries to put God under



**Illustration 3**

scrutiny for our examination, for our approval or rejection. God cannot be approached in that way. Which is your attitude—Is God under the microscope for you? Or at the other end of a telescope—as we look in awe and wonder and worship? *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?* (vv 20-21).

**Illustration 4**



In fact, Paul would have us stop our questioning of God, in order that we can listen instead to what God is saying to us. There are moments in life like that, aren’t there? when we have to stop talking and listen. One aerobics instructor, with a class of middle-aged folk, told them they needed to stop, sit quietly, and listen to their bodies to know when they had taken enough exercise. One said to her later after a particularly hard session, “I’ve been listening quietly to my body, as you told us to, and do you know? It has not got a single nice thing to say to me!” Well, if we will let God speak to us, it may help to solve some of the puzzles of life.

## **2) Let God show you what He is like!**

Let God show you what He is like is the gist of what Paul is saying in vv 22-29. Let’s read verses 22-24: *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?* God is a God of revelation according to the bible. He is a God who chooses to make Himself known. And this puzzle of why God sends people to hell has to be viewed against the background of His desire to make His character known to us: *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory* (vv 22-23). Notice the link between those verses: God shows us His wrath in order that we may know the riches of His glory in mercy: *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory?* (vv 22-23). We cannot understand the glory of God’s mercy without first grasping the nature of His wrath: His settled hostility to evil. God is against what is bad. He is opposed to all evil, and He has the power to do

something about it. *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?* (v 22). When I grasp that, I begin to realise how wonderful it is that God should also have mercy on people like me, who are bad and deserve His wrath. My brother-in-law and sister were on holiday in Thailand on Boxing Day. My brother-in-law has shown me a photograph he took of a large wave coming in early that morning. He had no idea that it was the Tsunami that was killing 300,000 people round the rim of the India Ocean. But now that he does know, he is very grateful that he and the family were not actually down on the beach at that moment. Without the knowledge, he would not have been grateful. Because you and I know that we deserve God's wrath, His judgement on what is wrong in our hearts and lives, and because we know that judgement is real, not just theoretical, we realise how astounding His mercy is, how amazing His grace! Without darkness, we could have no concept of light. Without God's wrath, there could be no mercy. Some people believe everyone will be saved. That is called universalism. A Universalist God is a merciful God because He does not mind about sin. The true God minds passionately about sin (that is His wrath), and He has the power to deal with it and to show mercy (that is His grace).

*What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory?* (vv 22-23). There is a subtle difference between verses 22 and 23: verse 23 tells us that God prepared in advance the objects of His mercy for glory; but verse 22 does not say that God prepared the objects of His wrath for destruction. The implication is that they prepared themselves for that fate. As we are about to see at the end of the chapter, Paul holds firmly to two truths that we find very hard to reconcile: that God is absolutely sovereign in salvation and condemnation (see verse 18) and that human beings are entirely responsible for their own condemnation. Nowhere does the Bible ask us to choose between divine sovereignty and human responsibility: if verses 6-29 of this chapter have asserted the sovereign election of God as the sole reason why anyone is saved, the final verses of the chapter are going to make clear that, if anyone is lost, it is their own responsibility.

But first, Paul makes his point from the Old Testament. First, from the prophet Hosea, that God delights to change people's status with Him: *As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God'"* (vv 25-26). And second, from Isaiah, that God had made clear that only some of the Israelite nation would be saved: *Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah"* (vv 27-29). There had been no change in God's plan. He had declared these matters already. Right from the outset, God had decided that the church would be neither Jewish nor Gentile, but called out from both: see verse 24: *even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles*, because it consists of those from both groups who respond to Jesus, which takes us to our final verses and our last point:

### **3) A Stumbling-block or a stepping-stone?** (vv 30-33)

We will return next week to this pursuing of righteousness, which is a theme that continues in chapter 10. For this week, we will end with the stumbling-stone with which the chapter ends.

The image of a stone or rock runs through the Old Testament and is picked up and applied to Jesus in the New Testament. When all has been said, it is by Jesus that we will be judged—not by our theoretical belief in the existence of God, not by whether we can make sense of pre-destination and free will, not even by how eagerly we pursued righteousness... but by what we did with Jesus. You do realise that, don't you? Paul has put together two rock passages in Isaiah in verse 33 (look at it please). Isaiah 28:16 says: *So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.* But Paul has inserted another description of the rock from Isaiah 8:14—*a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall*, because Jesus will

be one or the other for each one of us: either the sure foundation upon which we build our lives, or the test that brings us down to disaster.

The human mind is not just too small to understand God (as we saw at the start); it can also be too perverse to want to understand Him. It will make us stumble if it can. But God offers us Jesus and asks us what we will do with Him? If we try to act as though He is not there and we do not need Him, we will trip. He is like this block—if I try to ignore it, I trip. If I stand on it, I rise. There are only two ways to relate to Jesus; either I trust myself to Him and build my life on Him, or I trip, stumble and fall. Which is happening for you just now? Is Jesus actually a problem to you?—Are these passages difficult because God has to pass our tests to win our approval?

Are we determined to put God under the microscope?



Or do we trust, even when we cannot fully see?



*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*