

If you are a believer the Lord is at work in your life to conform you into the image of Christ. If you are an unbeliever he is also at work in your life, to draw you to Christ. God didn't just make the world and let human beings get on with it (that's called Deism.) He continues to be actively involved, especially with those creatures he has made in His own image, me and you.

In Romans 9 Paul uses the powerful analogy of the Potter and the clay to help us understand how God is at work in human lives. Have you ever watched a potter at work? It takes time to produce a beautiful pot; likewise God makes everything beautiful in its time (Eccl 3:11).

I am sure Paul had Isaiah in mind when he used the analogy of the Potter and the clay: *But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand, all of us!* (Isaiah 64:8).

1. He is the Potter and we are the clay

Paul has been arguing in Romans 9 that *not all Israel is Israel*. Just as God worked according to His elective purposes among the patriarchs, so now there was a remnant Jewish believers chosen by grace. Furthermore, just as God hardened Pharaoh's heart to make His Name known throughout the earth, so Israel as a nation was hardened, the consequence being that the gospel would be known among the gentile nations. But if this is true, the argumentative person will say, "*Why then does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?*" (Romans 9:19). Paul responds in 9:20-21 by using the analogy of the Potter and the clay. In summary, He is the Potter and we are the clay, and He knows what He is doing, even if our understanding is limited.

Sometimes, as with Pharaoh, as with hardened Israel, God uses sinful human beings who resist His will to achieve His purposes. God used the Babylonians, who were a nation more wicked than Israel to punish Israel, even though later God would punish Babylon. In Acts we read: *This man was handed over to you by God's set purposes and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross* (Acts 2:23). God used (or allowed?) wicked men (*vessels for dishonourable use*;) to achieve His set purpose for Jesus to die for the sins of the world. It wasn't of course only the Jews who crucified Jesus, but also the Romans, and in a very real sense us also, because it was our sin that put Jesus on the cross. In other words, we are all *by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind*. (Ephesians 2:3).

However, just because God even uses human wickedness to achieve His purposes, it does not follow that God is unjust to hold human beings responsible for their actions, because God is the standard of justice in the first place. We are the mere clay, and we have no right to set up our own standards of justice separate from those that have been given.

The fact is that God is **both Sovereign and** we are free to choose good or evil. To talk about God's sovereignty and therefore authority in our society is difficult because it sounds like theocracy, and manipulative. But God's sovereignty is such that it leaves us totally free, because God is love. Yet He is still Sovereign! Jesus modelled a very different mode of power and authority than worldly standards, and God has been called the Suffering God. We mustn't allow the world to squeeze us into its own warped understanding of God's sovereignty.

He is the Potter and we are the clay: *the Lord God formed the man of the dust from the ground* (Genesis 2:7). We are made up of the same stuff (90 or so stable chemical elements) as Creation.

After sin came into the world the Lord said to Adam, *For dust you are, and to dust you shall return* (Genesis 3:19c). This is our destiny, and it is easy to prove! Except ... that the Master Potter has a plan to transform damaged clay pots for glory.

2. He is the Potter and able to transform damaged clay vessels.

In Romans 9:22-24 Paul expresses God's longsuffering with human beings, because He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2Peter 3:9, Romans 2:4). Note, that the vessels of wrath are *fitted for destruction*, and vessels of mercy are *prepared for glory*. (Unfortunately this important point isn't clear in modern Bible translations, but it comes out well in the KJV.) The preparation is God's work in our lives unto glory! Paul knew he was once a blasphemer, a persecutor and insolent (1Timothy 1:13). We also were once ... fill in the blanks for yourself! Yet, *even us he has called* (Romans 9:24), and *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us* (2Corinthians 4:7). The work of the Master Potter is to transform damaged clay vessels into vessels prepared for glory.

Not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles. Paul was Apostle to the Gentiles, but he continued to take the gospel to the Jew first (Romans 1:16), for the restoration of Israel (Acts 15:16-17). The big controversy in the early church, which is something which is quite obvious to us, even strange, was that the Gentiles were included in the commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13).

God is in the business of taking fragile and damaged clay pots and transforming them into Christ likeness. *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28). What are *all things*? All things include the good and the bad; the struggles and the heartaches; the successes and the failures; the joys of life and its tragedies. He will even turn our sins for good if we allow Him. This is amazing grace. When does He really start to shape us? When we embrace His sovereignty, and believe Jesus is Lord.

3. He is the Potter and He makes clay vessels fit for purpose.

There is an eternal dimension to God's work in our lives. But he is also working to shape us into a vessel fit for purpose in this world. What is this purpose? *That He might make known the riches of His glory* (Romans 9:23).

God made known the riches of His glory to the Jewish remnant, who then made it known to the Gentiles. God's word to Abraham had not failed, but the promises to Abraham were being fulfilled: *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you will I curse; and all families on earth will be blessed through you* (Genesis 12:2-3). This verse has been called the Biblical foundation of mission. However it is better described as the missional basis of the Bible! God is continually reaching out to include more and more people into His great big family.

In other words, God uses people to reach people. We can probably think of the people God used in our lives to bring us to Christ. Why does God do it in this way? Why doesn't God just zap us from heaven? The answer is because God is building a new community of redeemed people. He is not just saving a much of individuals who are "saved". Church, as the community of God's people is therefore primary, and not secondary in God's purposes.

God wants all of us to be transformed by this gospel. As we allow Him to shape and mould us, so may we be those who can be a link in the chain to bring others to a knowledge of the riches of His glory (Ephesians 2:10).