

Autonomy and Providence

Romans 9:22

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Will you take a Bible, loved ones, and turn to Romans 9:22? Let's just read it and then begin to talk together about it. We're studying the next verse in Romans, 9:22, "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction." In connection with this verse, let's discuss autonomy and providence. Autonomy is "auto" in Greek and "nomas", law: self-law, self-rule. Providence is our belief that God's overruling guidance and power ensures that certain things happen in our lives.

So you see, there is a problem there. How do you have self-rule on the one side and how do you reconcile that to God's ability in providence to rule our lives and bring certain things into them and make sure that certain things happen? There is a problem there.

What are you going to do with the rest of your life? Whether you're 20, or whether you're 60 -- what are you going to do with the rest of your life now? I can think that some of us may say, "Who knows? I may just take off. I may sell the few possessions I have and I may just travel, just go." That's one reaction that's possible. The other one is, "Well my life is set for me. I take it that I'll just carry on bearing the responsibilities that I have. I'll just keep going the way that I'm going. I think that's probably what I'll do with the rest of my life. I'll do with it what I've been doing for the past 20, 30 or 40 years."

Neither of those attitudes is consistent with reality. Neither of those attitudes is right in the light of what our Creator's attitude to us is because the one is a kind of attitude, "Well it doesn't matter to anybody what I do with my life. I mean, I can do whatever I want. Nobody cares too much. It doesn't affect anybody very much." And in that there's more of a tinge of, "Oh what does my life matter? It's not important to the world or to anybody what I do with my life."

Then the other attitude has more than a tinge of, "Well a part of my life is set. I can't do anything about it. I think all I can do is walk it to the very end the way it's set down." Both of those attitudes are extremes that are not right in so far as God is the kind of God that we've been finding him to be -- because of course, what we discovered was that what you do with your life is not simply up to you.

You can't just say, "Well I'll just take off. I may just travel." You can't say that because what we've been discovering is that God showed us through Jeremiah the prophet, that he, the Creator of the whole world and our Creator, is like a potter. We're like the clay. The clay hasn't the knowledge or the right to say to the potter, "Oh I want to be a jug," or, "I want to be a beaker," or, "I want to be a cup." That's not the way it works. The potter is the one who knows what kind of utensils and what kinds of containers are needed in his world. He determines what we will be.

So first of all, God is the potter. If you get to know him, you get to know the plan he has for your life. But you can't just say, "Oh I think I'll just take off. I think I'll just go. I think I'll just go wherever my whim leads me." Every one of us here in this room -- and in all the rooms where people are watching this -- every one of us has been sent here by our Creator with a plan for our lives that he has devised carefully.

On the other hand, you remember, Jeremiah makes it very clear that God can only do with us what we will allow him to do. A potter is limited as to what he can do by the kind of clay that he's working with. You remember, that's in Jeremiah, if you like just to look at it. We read it last time about two weeks ago. Jeremiah 18:9, "And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or kingdom that I will build and plant it." So if I determine success for a kingdom, if I look into a kingdom and I say, "I'm going to make that kingdom successful." Or you or me, "I look at you," God says, "and I determine you will be rich and wealthy. Or I look at you and I determine you will do great works for humanity in the way of loving them and protecting them. If I declare that and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it."

So God plainly can only do with us what we, as the clay, are willing to allow him to do. If we're not willing to follow his ideal plan for our lives then he has to change it. So of course, the Jew who reads Jeremiah has no feeling of fatalism, you know. He has no idea of a kind of karma existence that keeps on churning because the impersonal forces behind the universe have determined that I'll be a teacher, or that I'll be a garbage collector, or that I'll be a waitress. The Jew has no sense of that kind of fatalism. The Jew sees God's plan for us as a dynamic thing that depends utterly on our agreement and our response to the way he handles us.

So the Potter lovingly handles the clay. As the clay begins to shape up, then he is able to do what he originally planned. But, if the clay breaks or a crack develops then he has to scrap the thing and make something different of that piece of clay because it isn't capable of fulfilling his original plan. That's the way God deals with us. So really, God looks into the very essence of you, into the essential nature of you. That's what a good potter does. He takes the clay, looks into it and sees what kind of clay it is. He handles it, molds it, kneads it with his fingers as God does with you and me. Through the circumstances and the events that come into our lives, he's checking us and testing us, pressing here and pressing there, finding out what we're made of. Then in the light of it, he devises a perfect plan that will utterly fulfill the personalities that he sees are in the very heart of us.

Now that's the meaning of that verse that often we misunderstand. It's Romans 8:29a. God's word, if you really understand it, presents such a happy God. We so misunderstand it and make him out to be such a tyrant. Romans 8:29a, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined." Predestined is "proorizo" in Greek -- means pre-designed. So he takes you when you're a little baby, even before you become a little baby, God was able to foreknow. He was able to look into the very heart of you and see, "Ah this kid will really enjoy art. This guy will really enjoy mathematics. This girl will really enjoy cooking. This girl will really enjoy engineering. This guy will really enjoy painting." God looks into the very heart of us, and then he doesn't only see what our abilities are, but he sees the kind of personalities we have. He knows where we will fit in most perfectly to his world and where we will be utterly fulfilled.

After deciding that, he then pre-designs -- that's what predestines means -- he pre-designs a perfect plan for our lives. That's the way the Father works. He's able to fulfill it in response to our attitude to his overall plan. His overall plan is in the rest of that verse, "For those who he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." So God is able to fulfill his perfect plan for you according to the way you respond to his overall design for each one of us, and that is that we'll become like Jesus -- so that we can live with him and his Father forever. That's the way God operates with us.

A question comes up this morning. Most of us can probably see how God can rule our lives if we agree to his overall plan, which is to make us like his Son Jesus. Most of us here can probably say, "Yeah, yeah, I can see how he can rule our lives. Then, if we accept his overall plan for all of us, because obviously he has our co-operation -- but what about the millions of people that don't accept that plan? What about the Hitler's? What about the Stalin's? What about the Sons of Sam [serial killers]? Forget those extreme examples. What about the millions of ordinary loved ones with whom we work, and with whom we live day-after-day who don't accept God's plan for their lives, who don't accept that they're here primarily to become like his Son Jesus so that they can live in that divine trinity family forever? What about them? He can't rule their lives. Surely, he can't rule their lives?"

Then of course, the consequence of that is what about poor little us, because their lives are bumping up against our lives all the time? And so, "Sure, I'm prepared to believe that God's overruling guidance and providence can ensure that my life will go the way he wants it to be, but my life is at the mercy of these other wildcat planets that are flying in all directions. They're brushing up against me day after day after day." Wouldn't it be true to say that a great deal of our complaining is connected with that? "Oh if that boss wouldn't act the way he does. If that girl could only spell, my letters would look so much better." "My mum -- if she was just a little more understanding I could have the happiest marriage of anybody in the whole world."

Aren't we always breaking under the effect of other people's lives in our lives? We're so often saying, "Well, I know the way my life should go. I know God is in charge of my life but those other people, those other people. They're always brushing up against me. What do I do with those people?" And really, that's a well-known problem in what we call "theodicy" in theology. It's a question of God's righteousness and goodness. The question is this, "How does the free-will of Godless people fit into God's providence or into God's overruling guidance of his own children?"

In other words, the Warsaw Ghetto, Belzec, Dachau, Buchenwald -- are those examples of God's world being out of his control? Are they? In other words, when a Godless person rejects God's overall plan to conform him to the image of his Son Jesus, is that Godless person then absolutely out of God's control? Is he like a wildcat planet that charges round the universe brushing up against all the planets that are going in the regular ordered orbits?

Is the Warsaw Ghetto, Dachau and Buchenwald part of God's world that is absolutely outside his control, or worse, IS under his control? Has he designed Dachau, the Warsaw Ghetto, Buchenwald and then all the thousands of other inconvenient events that affect our own lives adversely? Now which is true? Do you see the problem, loved ones? That's one of the problems that people talk about in the question or the problem of evil.

Now the answer is actually in this verse that we're studying. So will you look at it, and then we'll just elaborate it a little. I believe that God will help us to know how we should deal with these things. Romans 9:22, "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction." The vessels of wrath are obviously the people who produced the Warsaw Ghetto, Buchenwald and Dachau.

Do you see the first thing we need to see? The first thing we need to see is that the Creator is limited by what the clay is willing to do. A vessel of wrath becomes a vessel of wrath not because God has originally in his ideal plan designed it as a vessel of wrath. A vessel of wrath becomes a

vessel of wrath because the clay is fit only for that. It's not that God made it for that. In the next verse that we'll study next Sunday, we'll see God prepared it for something entirely different. The first thing that we need to see is that the Creator, or the Potter, is limited as to what he can do with a life by the very essential nature of that life itself.

Now would you just look again at Jeremiah, loved ones, and just clarify that by reading those verses. Jeremiah 18:7 and there are the two sides to it that are expressed by Jeremiah. Jeremiah 18:7-10, If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it."

So the first thing we need to see in this verse is that it says that these vessels of wrath were MADE for destruction. You see in Romans 9:22, "Endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction." Now the participle is the Greek word "kateertisména". It doesn't mean which GOD made for destruction. Do you see that? In the next verse, it's very clearly expressed by different construction. Verse 23, "In order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory." But that isn't the kind of construction that is used here, it doesn't say, "The vessels of wrath which GOD has prepared for destruction." It says, "The vessels of wrath MADE for destruction. "Kateertisména" means vessels of wrath that have fitted themselves, that have changed themselves completely, and over a series of years by their own choices and their own exercise of their freewill, has fitted themselves so that they're useful and fit only for eternal destruction.

So that's the first thing we need to see, that Hitler fitted himself for destruction. God did not make Hitler as a little baby in his mum's womb to be the tyrant that he turned out to be. God did not make murderers to destroy the way they have destroyed. God made them first as he made all of us, perfect. But by a series of choices of their own wills, and by a series of exercising their right to their own way, they have fitted themselves for destruction and that only.

Now that's plain to you if you look at the rest of the verse, Romans 9:22, "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made known for destruction." Now if he had made the vessels for destruction originally, you'd never talk about him enduring with much patience those vessels. You only endure with much patience something that you didn't produce yourself and something that you actually don't want. So you don't make something wrong and then pretend that you're angry at what it's doing. You're only impatient with something when it isn't fitting into what you had planned for it -- and so it is with the vessels of wrath. They chose their own way and it comes out again and again.

Look at the story of Pharaoh. He was a vessel of wrath. He was a man that opposed God's people and God's children. Exodus 9:27 expresses clearly that it was not GOD that made Pharaoh behave the way he did, it was Pharaoh CHOOSING this for himself, choosing his own way. It's Exodus 9:27, "Then Pharaoh sent, and called Moses and Aaron, and said to them, 'I have sinned this time.'" So the vessels of wrath normally know they've sinned. "The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Entreat the Lord; for there has been enough of this thunder and hail; I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.' Moses said to him, 'As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, that you may know that the earth is the Lord's. But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not

yet fear the Lord God.” And so God even himself knew that Pharaoh didn’t fear him.

So verse 33, “So Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh, and stretched out his hands to the Lord; and the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured upon the earth. But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken through Moses.” So loved ones, vessels of wrath are vessels of wrath because of exercise of their own will, not because God has made them like that.

What’s God’s response to vessels of wrath? Well you can see it there in Romans 9:22. You see, “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power.” Ah, he has only one reaction. When he sees a little baby crying with hunger in Egypt because of Pharaoh, he just immediately wants to show his wrath and his power. He wants to destroy that evil being that is opposing his will and his plan. He wants to destroy that evil creature that is causing pain to others. That’s what the verse says. “What if God, desiring to show his power and his wrath.” The first little baby that died in the Warsaw Ghetto? The Father, our dear Father, has only one reaction and that is to strike out and kill what is bringing pain to his children. That’s what God wants to do. He wants to do that. So we should never have any doubt. Never ask, loved ones, “Does God agree with evil?” The Father doesn’t agree with evil.

The Father sent his Son to oppose evil. God himself, every time something bad happens, he wants to strike out and destroy it, but do you see what the verse says? “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction.” Why? First of all, in order to preserve free will. That’s the first thing. It has to be. God, most of all, wants a family of free agents who love because they have chosen to love and they want to be part of his family because they’ve exercised their free wills. I’ve shared with you before, if every time something went wrong in our world God sent an angel down and destroyed the consequence, do you see that you really destroy the free will?

Those of you who have children know that. If you’re trying to encourage responsibility in the child and it stretches out his hand for the twenty-fifth time towards the flame, there comes a time when you have to let it feel the heat -- because that’s finally the only thing that will teach it what flame is. And so it is with the Father. He cannot destroy our free will by sending banks and armies of angels down to stop the Belzec’s, and stop the Dachau’s and stop Buchenwald’s every time they occur. He has to, even though he wants to do that, in order to preserve the reality and the principle of free will in our universe. He has to endure with patience the vessels of wrath. And for another reason, to give Hitler a chance to repent.

I mean, we think we love until we see the Father’s love. We think we love until we see God’s love. But do you see that right from the first baby that died in the first concentration camp, the Father had only one desire? And that was to end the horror there and then. And yet, right up to the very moment when Hitler shot himself in the Chancellery in Berlin, God was beseeching, and pleading and commanding him to repent. That is our God. That’s partly why he endures with much patience these vessels of wrath.

Now what is to be our attitude to the vessels of wrath that we come up against? The boss that has no sympathy with all this religion business? The dear one who keeps upsetting our lives by the way she behaves, or the way he behaves? What is to be our attitude to the person who is brushing up against our life because they don’t care about God and they run their own lives by their own power

and by their own greed? Well first of all, see that they're that because they wanted to be that. It's their own wills that have brought them to that place. It's because they want to behave like that. See too that your Father doesn't want them to be like that. He wants to protect you from everything that will harm your life. See that clearly.

See also that he's enduring with much patience what they're doing to him and to you. He's doing that to give them a chance to repent, to give them a chance to see that he loves them and that there's a different kind of life that is available to them. Then loved ones, it's most important see that they are still vessels, maybe of wrath, but the Bible still talks about them as vessels in the potter's hands. They are not out of the influence of the Potter. Dachau is not beyond the rule and the guidance of the Creator. It is still a vessel. Hitler is not beyond the control of our God. He is still a vessel, a vessel of wrath -- a vessel that deserves wrath, and a vessel that is expressing the very opposite of love: the wrath that fills the universe that works apart from God -- but he is still a vessel in God's hands. Do you know this -- the Warsaw Ghetto was not the first time the Jews had ever faced torture and pain. Dachau and Buchenwald was not the first time they had ever faced pain and cruelty from other people. The Old Testament is filled with those experiences. But do you know this, that Jewish people while they lived under the leadership of the prophets that God sent them, never for one moment believed that their oppressors were not instruments in the hands of their God?

They always believed that -- whether it was the Assyrians, or whether it was the Babylonians, or whether it was the Germans, whoever it was -- their God was still molding this vessel and had made it for a purpose, and was using it to conform them to the image of his Son. That's what God is doing with the most sarcastic colleague you have, with the most oppressive employer that you have and with the most irritating dear one in your home. God is using that vessel to conform you to the image of his Son. He expects you to respect that. He expects you to stop this little complaining, crying attitude, "Oh, if I only had a different boss", or "If only that person would not brush up against me so often", or "If that person would stay away from my life and let me get it ordered." Stop that loved ones.

Begin to say, "Lord, thank you. Thank you for all the beautiful things that have happened to me. Thank you for all the things that gone well this day. Thank you for all the dear people who have made my life easier this day. And then Lord, especially thank you for these vessels, maybe they're not vessels of wrath at all, Lord. They seem to be so to me because they have so often seemed to be cutting across my plans for my life and even your will for my life. Lord, thank you for these vessels that you are using for a definite purpose in my life to conform me to the image of your Son, Jesus. Thank you, Father, for them. Thank you that as Jesus was on the cross in perfect rest and perfect peace as he cried at the end of his life, 'Into thy hands I commit my spirit,' and cried out, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do,' -- as Jesus was in perfect rest and peace, even faced with so many vessels of wrath -- so Lord, I know there's a place of rest in peace for me, too. I thank you for these loved ones, Father. I know that they cannot do anything to me that you cannot redeem. I know that they can do nothing to spoil your plan for my life. I know that you're working them into the original plan that you have for me. I do not need to be irritable about them. I do not need to be worried in case somehow they're going to spoil your plan for my life or my plan for my life. Lord, they can do nothing beyond what you allow them to do because they are vessels in the Potter's hand. You are making them for a purpose in my life."

Loved ones, I pray that you'll do that tomorrow. You dear guys, who the secretary spells the thing wrong for the forty-fourth time, I hope you'll do that. And you ladies, as us gentleman -- maybe

we're not gentleman when we do this -- come half-an-hour late and the dinner is burned, would you see us the other way round and say, "Lord, thank you. Thank you that this calls for me to have patience that I think is beyond reason. But Lord, you are the one that have exercised patience beyond reason with me. Lord, I know that you have it to give me."

And all the rest of us, loved ones, will you look out for the vessels -- maybe we call them of wrath, maybe they aren't vessels of wrath at all, but if they are vessels of wrath -- and begin to see that they are not God's ideal will for us, but they are his permissive plan for our lives. He's using them to bring out something new of Jesus in us. So let's not carp against them. Let's allow God to work them into his plan for our lives because God does work everything for good to them that love him. He works all things according to the counsel of his will. Praise God. Let us pray.

Thank you, Father, for a place to stand in regard to what the society calls evil events in our lives. Thank you for a place to stand, for a place of rest and peace, a place of faith where we can see that these things are not out of your control at all. They're doing what they're doing because they want to and not because you originally devised them to do it, and not because you're forcing them to do it, or even motivating them to do it -- and not because you agree with what they're doing because your whole attitude is one of desiring to show your wrath and your power against them. But Lord, thank you that they are still vessels in your hands. You are using them in adjusting the effects of their lives upon ours so that we grow up into the fullness of the stature of Jesus.

So we want to begin to thank you for these things and these dear people. We want to pray all the time that as you endure with much patience their lives so we will be used to bring them to an awareness of you and your love. We give ourselves to you for this purpose in Jesus' name. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and evermore. Amen.