

Romans 9:22 Autonomy and Providence

by Ernest O'Neill

The sermon explores the tension between human free will and God's providential control over our lives as illustrated in Romans 9:22.

Scripture: Jeremiah 18:9

Topics: "Divine Providence", "Free Will"

Description

Ernest O'Neill discusses the concepts of autonomy and providence, challenging the congregation to consider what they will do with the rest of their lives, emphasizing that God has a specific plan for each individual that is not based on fatalism but on our response to Him. He explains that God, like a potter, designs a plan for our lives based on our free will choices, shaping us year by year to fulfill His purpose. Despite the disruptions caused by those who reject God's plan, God works all things according to the counsel of His will.

Transcript

INTRODUCTION

1. Romans 9:22-let's discuss 'Autonomy and Providence. What are you going to do with the rest of your life? Whether you're 20 or 60?

- i. Who knows? I may take off and just sell the few possessions I have and just travel-just go!
- ii. Oh, I suppose I'll carry on doing what I've been doing. Living the life I've lived so far and carrying the responsibilities I've carried so far. That's what it looks like as far as my future is concerned.

2. Neither of these is reality! Neither corresponds to the way things really are. The first one expresses an attitude that suggests it doesn't matter to or affect anyone what you do with your weeks and years. The second one expresses the very opposite kind of conviction. That your life is set in the way it's going to go and it's unlikely that anything will change it. In other words, the first has more than a tinge of 'what does my life matter to anybody?' about it. The second one has more than a tinge of 'my life's pattern is set so what can I do but walk it to the end?'

3. God has shown us that reality is very different from both of these extremes. It is neither a trackless space through which we try to find our own way. Nor, is it a fatalistic karma existence about which we can do nothing. Two weeks ago, we say that God explained to Jeremiah that-

i. He, our Maker, was like a potter and we were like the clay. The clay doesn't have the burden of trying to form itself into a pot. The potter does that because he knows what kind of vessels and utensils are needed in the world. So, God has a plan for the rest of your life. Let's get to know Him and you get to know it.

ii. But God explained to Jeremiah that the clay is not just a passive lump of matter that He makes and therefore, utterly controls. He explained that He can only create of the clay what the clay allows Him to create. Jeremiah 18:9-10. In other words, the Jew had no concept of fatalism when Paul talked about God as a potter. Rather, the Jew knew the teaching of the prophets that everyone of us here has been created by God to fulfil a certain plan that He has carefully devised for us and that will utterly fulfil every facet of our personalities. But that plan has to be modified according to the way we respond to God's handling of us.

4. In other words, God looks into the inner essence, the essential nature of the clay in His hand and then designs a plan in the light of what He sees. Romans 8:29a Whether He is able to make us into a vessel of mercy or a vessel of wrath is determined by the response of our free wills to His overall purpose for us all. Romans 8:29b Then, of course, as a potter He carries out His design as our lives turn, year by year. He lovingly with the fingers of circumstances and events shapes our lives so that they fulfil His plan for us.

5. Most of us can see how God can do that with those of us who are willing to accept His overall purpose for us. That is to become like Jesus, but surely our lives, however ordered they are by His providence, overruling care and guidance, are going continually to be disturbed and disrupted by the millions of other people who exercise their free wills to reject His purpose for them. If He gives them the right to reject Him, surely they then are like wild-cat planets that charge through the universe utterly beyond His control. Since there are so many who reject Him and our lives are affected by so many such people through the day, how can we have any real belief that God works all things according to the counsel of His will?

VESSELS OF WRATH

1. The verse we're studying today gives us a strong, clear answer to this problem of theodicy-how does the exercise of free will by godless people co-exist with the idea of God's providential overruling and guidance of the lives of His children? Or was the Warsaw Ghetto, Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald and the destruction of millions of innocent people not clear demonstration that God's world was utterly out of His control? Surely, if you don't believe that, then you have to say all those things were under His control and therefore that God willed the gas chambers and every other evil or even inconvenient things that happens in our lives? Here's the verse: Romans 9:22.

2. First, we need to see the truth which every Jew studied in the prophecy of Jeremiah. The potter can only carry out the plan that the living human clay will allow Him. Indeed, that He has to make His plan for each life in the light of the response of each individual free will. Jeremiah 18:7-10. This pre-eminence of human and God's commitment to preserve it is set forth in the perfect participle 'made'-katertismena(Greek)-NOT made by God(for destruction)-not 'which God has made' as the next verse 'which He has prepared beforehand for glory'. But completely put together and fitted by their choices and actions so that they are now fit only for eternal destruction.

3. Their present state is due to their daily choosing their own rights and ways rather than what God originally made them to be. Evil is evident from the words 'God has endured with much patience'. You don't make something to do evil and then talk about enduring with much patience what you have made. You talk of 'enduring with much patience' only something that you cannot at that moment change!

4. So, Hitler was what he was because he wanted to be NOT because God wanted him to be. Pharaoh was the same-Exodus 9:27-30, 33-35. So, vessels of wrath choose their own eternal destiny.

GOD'S RESPONSE

1. God's attitude to such cruelty and oppression is plainly expressed in Romans 9:22a. The present participle 'thelon'. Although He wants to show and demonstrate His reaction to put an end to anything that would destroy His perfect plan for us all, yet He endures with much patience. So, God's will is to destroy Pharaoh immediately one little Jewish baby cries from hunger but He refrains from destroying Pharaoh on the spot. Because the moment He does so, He destroys humanity's right to exercise free will and therefore humanity's opportunity to ever become self-determining friends of God Himself and His Son.

2. God's commitment to this vision of a family of friends to love because they are free from all coercion to love is expressed in God's persistent, patient, repeated attempts to get the 'vessels of wrath' to turn and repent. Exodus 9:30. God appealed to Pharaoh ten times through ten different plagues. Jesus showed the same patient love to Judas. John 13:21-30. So our Father's great heart broke with the agony that Jesus showed on Calvary when the first little baby was killed in the first gas chamber. Yet, up to the very moment when Hitler shot himself in the Chancellery in Berlin, God was beseeching him and commanding him to repent.

GOD'S CONTROL

1. But, what is to be our attitude to these 'vessels of wrath' who almost daily brush up against our lives and affect them adversely? We are to see that they are doing what they are doing because they want to NOT because God made them for that. We are to see that He could destroy them in a moment and indeed wants to, but endures their existence to preserve the principle of free will and to give them every opportunity to repent. But, most of all, we are to see that they are 'vessels' maybe of 'wrath' BUT VESSELS STILL IN THE POTTER'S HANDS(Job 1:12) and can do only what He permits them to and can fit into His plan.

2. A potter may be limited by the response of the clay but he still makes a vessel that can be used. The holocaust of the Second World War was not the first time the Jewish people have endured torture and wrath at the hands of others. The Old Testament is a detailed list of such horror stories, but never once did the Jewish prophets ever think for a moment that their enemies were outside God's control. Always they knew God was using the free, rebellious wills of His enemies to further conform His children to the image of His Son.

3. So with us-the most antagonistic colleague at work, the most sarcastic oppressor we may ever have, may have chosen his eternal destiny BUT He can do nothing to us that God cannot redeem and mould and use to bring us into a greater conformity to His Son's image.

CONCLUSION

1. Romans 8:28.

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