

Romans 9:19-21

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Again Paul anticipates someone to respond, “Well then, why does God find fault in people? No one can resist God’s agenda.” Paul responds with a profound answer, “You’re only a created man. You cannot argue with God, your Creator.”

Paul anticipates an argument in response and says to His opponents: *You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”* (v 19).

Paul is saying that his opponents are implying that God cannot judge because He is sovereign, He is in control. Paul’s opponents *will say to me then* that God can’t judge me because I have no choice in the matter, therefore I cannot be held accountable by Him (*who resists His will?*)

But Paul retorts *On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God* (v 20). Paul’s meaning is clear here. He’s essentially saying, “Let’s get this straight. God is God. And we are not.” Paul asserts throughout his letter to the Romans that God will judge (Romans 1:18, 2:16, 14, 14:12). God will judge, not man. Not the competing Jewish “authorities,” and not Paul. We are accountable for our actions to God. He is sovereign, but He also gave us a choice, and our choice is real.

Interestingly, Paul again uses *O man* to address His detractors, the competing Jewish “authorities.” He chastised them thoroughly in Chapter 2, and begin his corrective words with:

“But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?”
(Romans 2:3)

Paul asks rhetorically, so he can answer the false charge: if God is also in charge of how we are made, if God is completely sovereign, then how can He judge us? Paul’s answer is that we cannot argue with God. *On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?* (v 20). We are the creation and He is the Creator.

Paul makes an analogy here about a potter molding clay into different types of vessels. One vessel is made for a special purpose, and another for a common purpose. *The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it?* (v 20).

Paul is saying a question like that would be crazy to ask. It is the potter who is doing the making. If the potter makes a cup, the cup is a cup, and cannot ask the potter why it’s a cup. It’s still a cup even if it could ask this question.

Likewise, it is God who has created us, and God who is sovereign over our lives, and God who is looking out for us (Romans 8:28): *Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel or honorable use and another for common use?* (v 21). We can’t ask our Creator why He does the things He does. God doesn’t answer to us.

It is beneficial for our understanding of the Bible to remember that many of its foundational principles are built on paradox, and much of the world is guided by western, Greek thought processes, which are bound within logical systems. The way we are taught to think as Greeks and Romans is that we can know everything. For more, read our article, [“Founding Paradox.”](#)

Paul is using logic to defend his gospel, but he is starting with a position of faith, a position that begins with “In the beginning God” rather than “I can know.” The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that relying upon reason and experience to understand the world is like trying to grasp and hold onto a mist of vapor—it is futile.

In the Bible, unknowable mysteries are unlocked through faith in the *person* of God. Paul uses logic, but will end chapters 9–11 by exclaiming that God’s wonderful, amazing ways are past knowing, to the glory of God (Romans 11:33–36). When we begin with God, and faith in God, then we can accept paradoxical truth without it being a contradiction, because it is rooted in the nature of God.

The constant paradox/mystery in the Bible is that God is two things at once. For example, God is both inside time as well as outside time. God is man (Jesus) and spirit. God is human as well as a transcendent being in the form of Jesus Christ. Jesus is both fully man and fully God (Hebrews 2:5–18).

The paradox in Romans 9 is this: is God sovereign, or does God give us free will? And the answer is, it’s both. The Bible does not begin with “In the beginning I shall know.” What it does start with is “In the beginning God.” In the beginning God created.

God is paradoxical to us, as created beings. But God is not a contradiction, because God is God. All things that exist do so because they were made by God. God is the “I Am”—that which exists without being created. God created all things that were created, and all things are held together by God (Colossians 1:17).

Even though God is sovereign over all, God still has the right to judge, and we as humans still have a choice. Therefore, it behooves each of us to make life-giving choices, because our choices have consequences. However, we can simultaneously rest in the knowledge that God is in control of outcomes, and we can rest in His sovereign will.

Biblical Text

¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” ²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?