

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, 23 in order to make known the riches of His glory for the vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory ... not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? Romans 9:22-23

If there are words that have created more confusion in the hearts of God's children and are more troublesome for Bible scholars to explain satisfactorily with the character of His love, one would be hard pressed to find them.

It is extremely hard for Christians to claim that their God is a God of love, and yet, defend, in the same chapter of Romans 9, the plain assertion by God Himself "*Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated.*"¹ Faced with the unenviable task of harmonizing such a declaration with God's love of the world, it would be easy to dismiss the entire discussion and let God sort things out when "we all get to heaven."

Still, for those who hunger for a deeper understanding of God's word, we can not easily withdraw from this or any other hard text and not think, "surely, there must be an explanation that makes sense." As Christians we are supposed to be able to explain to "*anyone the hope that lies within us.*"² This commandment tasks Christians with being able to provide a legal argument or verbal defense for their beliefs. In other words, this is not a trivial assignment nor do we take up providing an explanation of these verses lightly.

We don't blame those who steer clear of explaining such difficult passages. It's not like preachers and teachers of Christ are standing on street corners trumpeting their love for God using these verses. Even at football games all you ever see—or used to see—is John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world ...*" We have never seen Romans 9:22-23 proudly displayed or referred to when people are trying to introduce God's love to an audience. The reason is obvious: Christians have yet to

figure out a way to shoehorn these verses into an illustration that they think is consistent with God's love. (In fact, most Christians would probably prefer not to ever have to explain these verses to anyone.) Yet the same Scripture that asserts that "*God is Love*"³ just as clearly states, "*Esau, have I hated.*" How can these things be? How can one ever hope to harmonize such scriptures?

Further, when you start investigating the topic in the cloistered writings of various Christian expositors and commentators, the picture doesn't become clearer. Even a cursory examination of such writings provides the reader with a plethora of possible explanations instead of one with uniform agreement.

- Some writers gloss over or avoid the issue altogether.
- Others find it easier to subordinate their reason to some true but equally trite axiom as, "well, God's ways are mysterious and too deep for us to understand."⁴
- Still others meet the issue head on and boldly assert that God is well within His rights to prepare people for destruction i.e. eternal damnation.⁵ They maintain this view since a. He has perfect foreknowledge of how all people will turn out, for either good or ill, and b. since He is powerless (or is He just unwilling?) to change their minds, hearts or will, such evil people must be disposed of properly. Hell becomes, basically, an eternal garbage dump containing the rejects of God's "perfect" plan. I.M. Marshall, for example, suggests that God's use of Hell has more to do with keeping order than anything else. "There are 'dominions, authorities and powers' to be subjugated and destroyed, so that the people of God and the new creation may live in peace."⁶ That Hell also will serve as an eternal monument to the ineptitude of God's master plan seems to never cross the minds of Orthodox apologists.⁷ If such a thought does occur to them, they tend not to record it in their writings. What are we to make of the God Orthodox Christianity extols? Jesus, as the only begotten Son of God,

instructed His disciples to pick up and preserve the apparently valued but finite pieces of leftover food.⁸ In contrast, God throws away forever the eternal, but apparently non-valued fragments of His grand experiment. We conclude that God is more concerned about leftover food than people. Such is the conclusion one could draw when we examining the Gospel as taught in Orthodox Christianity. Hence, regrettably, the need for Hell. (For some hard-core members of orthodoxy that last fragment should have read, "Hence, the need for Hell.")

- Yet other writers, trying to hold the middle position, attempt to have it both ways. They trumpet God's sovereignty—without attaching blame to God for the colossal failure that Hell ultimately represents—while putting all the responsibility for Hell on the creature. In our opinion, we find this to be a grossly insufficient solution.

For example, Matthew Henry, the author of his famous *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, tries to walk the middle ground when explaining Romans 9:22-ff.⁹ Instead of clarifying the issue, he ends up supplying this colossal example of non-sense when he writes: (Note, in the section below: **Blue Text = Emphasis mine**)

What He does for them, He does before prepare them to glory. **This is God's work.**
[Apparently, only God can save]

We can destroy ourselves fast enough, [But we are more sovereign than God, apparently, having the power in ourselves to destroy ourselves. God does not overrule us in this "eternal" matter] **but we cannot save ourselves. Sinners fit themselves for hell,**

[It's their fault they're lost, not God's! Again, God in His kindness won't give us the power to save ourselves but He jolly-well will let us march ourselves straight into Hell for eternity—and sinners are responsible for their own loss and ruin] **but it is God that prepares saints for heaven). And would you know who these vessels of mercy are? Those whom he hath called (v.24); for whom he did predestinate those he also called, with an effectual call:**

[Oops! Did you catch the point at which his line of reasoning derailed? So Mr. Henry, here is the \$64,000 question your audience would ask of you: If God's calling is effectual unto salvation, as you maintain, why doesn't He just call everyone? After all, He is no respecter of persons.¹⁰ You've just argued that His calling is "effectual"—i.e. that it actually works. So if His calling actually works and He does NOT call a person, then that person is doomed. Their fitting themselves for destruction is *secondary* at best and irrelevant at worst. They are *primarily* lost because God didn't call them! But this can only mean that the loss of even one person must be laid at His feet, not ours, which clearly contradicts a key point of Mr. Henry's argument—that sinners fit themselves for Hell.]

and these not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.

Before moving on with the rest of my defense, it would be appropriate to say a few words about another weakness in Mr. Henry's line of reasoning. Notice he claims that people "fit **themselves**" for damnation. Contrast this with the idea that these same people "were fitted" for damnation and you will begin to see two sides of a very important theological debate—a debate centered on an issue with eternal implications. This idea has gained popularity over time because it becomes easier to accept the damnation of the lost and to feel less antipathy toward God for their loss. Did Mr. Henry ever learn Greek, the language that underlies the New Testament? We don't know. If he did, then his view, as recorded above, may be explained by his appealing to the Greek middle voice to support his contention that the lost have "fitted themselves for Hell." In this passage, Paul used a perfect tense participle based on the verb *katartizoo*. According to Thayer, this verb has primary active meanings such as "to render fit", "to arrange or adjust" or "to mend or repair."¹¹ While there is no disagreement about the tense of this participle, what is disputed among theologians is its correct voice. The Greek language makes no distinction *in form* between the middle and passive forms of this verb. Since voice information is carried in the form of the verb, correct assignment of the voice must, therefore, be based on other factors e.g. parallel grammar usage, context, and lexemic considerations. Most people who were raised speaking English know that our language has only two voices: active and passive. The Greeks had a third voice. It was called the middle voice. In using the middle voice the noun relates to verb in a different way than it does with the other two voices. In this case, since the middle voice in Greek gives rise in English to the idea that sinners "fitted **themselves** for destruction," Mr. Henry may have felt more comfortable with the above usage. **The key theological implication to note here is that such a construction would put the blame for the loss of the person on *himself* and not on God.**

Unfortunately for Mr. Henry and others who hold this view, theirs is a weak argument. Some scholars, such as Daniel B. Wallace of the Dallas Theological

Seminary, soundly refute this line of reasoning. We have reproduced his commentary on the exegesis of Romans 9:22 in full for the interested reader to consider. Such a reader is strongly encouraged to study the issues raised here more fully as opportunity and desire allow.

The view that the perfect [How the perfect tense affects this passage is beyond the scope of this article. In short though, the use of this tense only strengthens the role of the passive voice] participle is middle, and therefore a direct middle, finds its roots in Chrysotom, and is later echoed by Pelagius. The idea would be that these vessels of wrath “had prepared themselves for destruction.” Along these lines, it is also sometimes argued that such vessels can change their course: Although they were preparing themselves for destruction, they have the ability to avert disaster. To take the verb as a passive means that they “had been prepared for destruction,” without a specific mention of the agent.

The middle view has little to commend it.

First, grammatically, the direct middle is quite rare and is used almost exclusively in certain idiomatic expressions, especially where the verb is used consistently with such a notion (as in the verbs for putting on clothes). This is decidedly not the case with *katartizoo*: nowhere else in the NT does it occur as a direct middle.

Second, in the perfect tense, the middle-passive forms is always to be taken as a passive in the NT (Luke 6:40; I Cor 1:10; Heb 11:3)—a fact that, in the least, argues against an idiomatic use for this verb as a direct middle.

Third, the lexical nuance of *katartizoo*, coupled with the perfect tense, suggest something of a “done deal.” Although some commentators suggest that the verb means that vessels are *ready* for destruction, both the lexical nuance of the complete preparation and the grammatical nuance of the perfect tense are against this.

Fourth, the context argues strongly for a passive and completed notion. In v 20 the vessel is shaped by God’s will, not its own (“Will that which is molded say to its maker, ‘Why have you made me this?’”). In v 21, Paul asks a question with *ouk* (thus expecting a positive answer): Is not the destruction of the vessels (one for honor, one for dishonor) entirely predetermined by their Creator? Verse 22 is the answer to that question. To argue, then, that *kateertismena* (the form of *katartizoo* used here in verse 22) is a direct middle seems to fly in the face of grammar (the normal use of the voice and tense), lexeme, and context.¹²

Is there a better explanation for these verses than the tortured expositions just illustrated by Mr. Henry? We believe that there is. (Mr. Henry is hardly alone in writing such unsatisfactory descriptions of this text, and hence, this issue. We have read many such misguided missives from people who try to equally balance

God's sovereignty and man's accountability—vis-à-vis eternal damnation. In the end, they usually end up looking more silly and making God look more monstrous than before they started.)

If such an explanation exists—what are we to make of these words of God, so dark and fearful when compared to His love? How can we explain the impossible? How can we reconcile an infinitely loving God who paradoxically creates vessels of wrath bound for eternal destruction? In other words, “how can an infinite God of Love hold His finite creatures infinitely responsible?”¹³

The answer—**context and a correction.**

First, with respect to context, we argue that God is unfolding a brilliantly disguised plan in which it is necessary for Him—for a finite time only—to actually work in wrath and hate against these vessels of wrath He has chosen, while showing favor to the vessels of mercy. **The hidden purpose of the plan is to give all mankind—not just the vessels of mercy—an appreciation of good by experiencing the anguish of evil.** Once mankind has been sufficiently trained, mankind will flee evil and cling to good, and thus be made fit for an eternal presence and existence with God. This plan, unfortunately, calls for immersion of the world into a brutally honest and sinful environment.¹⁴ This environment has caused the editors of lexicons and dictionaries to add new terms such as world war, pandemic, concentration camp et.al to their products just because such horrific realities are part of the historical record. Yet, for all its horror, this same environment has been the stage where innumerable acts of courage and selflessness have occurred; mankind has been continually captivated by the beauty of the changing seasons. We've all experienced or observed, in one form or another, the celebration of birth and marriage, the beauties of symphonies of sound, the joys of learning and exploration. How many times have friends passed the time laughing together into the early hours of the morning? Such events—both good and evil—aren't a theoretical or esoteric knowledge base hidden away in some closet but are deeply empirical experiences that every

person on Earth has tasted to one degree or another. Thus, we argue that God's hatred of Esau and His creating vessels of wrath, fitting them for destruction must be understood in light of the way things are in this present "evil age." (Gal. 1.4) Since this age will one day be swept away when God makes "all things new,"¹⁵ we see no reason why Esau and vessels of wrath will continue to be trapped in the way things are now. This only solves half the dilemma. What about their destruction being eternal?

Secondly, we argue that Orthodox Christianity desperately needs to correct its belief in eternal damnation. It was never a part of God's plan to destroy the lost forever. We'll develop this theme more fully in a later section where we discuss Romans 11:32. For now, we boldly assert that Hell is NOT eternal!

Every plan—even a hidden one—has a beginning, middle and an end—which, in this case, roughly corresponds to chapters 9, 10 and 11 of Romans. Paul introduces the plan as we've noted in chapter 9. We are living today in parts of chapters 10 and 11. The culmination of the glory Paul describes in chapter 11 has yet to materialize. We maintain that these three chapters are one theme.¹⁶

If these three chapters are, indeed, a single theme, then the obvious question regards what the theme is and its starting point. The theme is **God's sovereignty** and the starting point turns out to be in chapter 9 verse 6 where Paul says, "**For it is not as though the word of God had failed.**" (NIV)

Dear reader, when you read these words, what thoughts cross your mind? What are the implications of this declaration? Well, the clearest one that comes to us is that Paul is arguing that, although by all outward appearances, *the Word of God appears to have failed*, it has, in fact, not failed at all. This appearance, Paul implies, is deceptive, an illusion, if you will. We learn later that this illusion—an illusion purposed, instigated and entirely worthy of God—is part of God's master plan to reconcile this lost creation back to Himself. One could easily, nonetheless, be forgiven for assuming that God's Word has failed, by looking solely at the world's condition. Nevertheless, Paul assures us that it has not!

He begins his description of the plan here in chapter 9 with an admittedly scary thought, continues to provide details of the plan in chapter 10 and then ends it in chapter 11, bursting at the seams with praise for God’s ultimate plan of salvation, saying **“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God...For from Him and through Him and to Him are (the) ALL THINGS!”**

So what happened in between these two, seemingly disparate sets of verses? Paul lays out God’s incredible plan for all to see.¹⁷ (Many Christians, we suspect, have failed to grasp this plan even though they have the text so easily at their disposal.) It is this plan of God, this mystery, which we now attempt to reveal. It is our sincere hope that, by the time we are done, this analysis will cause your heart to swell with a newfound appreciation and affection for God!

First things first. Can we not all agree, that ultimately, God is responsible for all that He has created? Since He created all things (Col. 1:20), He alone must be held accountable for the ultimate outcome of this grand experiment that He alone has originated. In short, either God is sovereign over all things or He isn’t. Paul sets out to prove the truth of this premise to his audience. He explains how all mankind is and will be affected by God’s sovereign actions. God has designed and launched ***His plan to restore His lost creation just because He is Sovereign!***

Paul illustrates this truth by showing how God plans to use two distinct groups of vessels—vessels of wrath, and, likewise, vessels of mercy. First, He shows us how He uses the vessels of wrath by citing two concrete examples: 1) the record of Pharaoh (verse 17) and the record of Jacob and Esau (8-13). Starting with these two *concrete* examples, Paul extrapolates to a population of as yet unknown and unspecified vessels of wrath (listed above) in the *abstract*. In these verses, Paul reveals some amazing facts:

- Who was picked and for what role was determined by God Himself.
- What role was selected for them had nothing to do with the individuals themselves, or *whether they were good or evil*. Let that sink in. We’ll wait.
- God has a purpose in election and that purpose will stand!

- God's plans were put in play before either child—and by extension, any such other vessel of wrath or mercy—was born and neither individual was consulted as to whether or not they preferred to take on the role or not. (Paul rubs this fact in by appealing to the Potter/Clay analogy of Jeremiah 18) As one Gospel preacher has noted, "Clay ain't got no say in the matter."
- God is NOT unjust in this plan or in His purposes for these individuals, and by extension, for any vessel of wrath or vessel of mercy.

At this point some readers will have concluded that the argument is over and that we might as well stop making the case. Why? Because even a child who accepts these facts and is equipped with the most rudimentary knowledge of the principles of Orthodox Christianity must conclude that God, as implied in these facts, is the one who determines who is saved and who is damned, **regardless of what they did**. Their outcomes—their eternal destinies—were decided even before they were born!

That inescapable conclusion is why Orthodox Christianity fights so ferociously to maintain the fiction that lost people "choose" to be so because of "their own free will." They choose to be damned, and no one—not even God Himself—can do anything about it. If it were known that God determined eternal damnation before an individual's birth, there is little doubt that such a god would become, rightly, repugnant in the eyes of people everywhere. Yet, with respect to its effect on people, the "Good News," as taught by Orthodox teachers and preachers, engenders the same type of antipathy toward God but to only a slightly lesser degree. That God would concoct such a scheme that tied His hands eternally to the eternal ruin of so many of His creatures doesn't seem to concern them. It's at least an explanation they can live with. Since damnation is eternal, God must be cleared of all accusation. Further, fault must be fastened to the creature himself. Common sense dictates that either God is a monster or man has to become co-equal with God. Worst of all, man has to be able to choose damnation for himself *even if God would have it otherwise*. Is this really the type of plan God, as described in Scripture, would attach his imprimatur to?

Both models have real problems with them. Obviously if God makes the decision for each person before they are born, then He is a morally repellant monster in human terms, because no one twisted His arm to even start this experiment. On the other hand, if God allows mankind's will to be raised to a higher level than His own, then God's judgment gets called into question since His will—even if it were for salvation for a person—can be thwarted by the mere decisions of mortals.

Although these models reflect the Orthodox and Calvinist teachings fomented over the past several centuries, we stop long enough to ask, "what if each model is wrong?"—not in their entirety—but in just in one or two key aspects? Just because we've been told for centuries that some tenet or other of Christian belief is now sacrosanct, inviolable, and beyond question, that does not make it so. A lie told a million times over a thousand years is still just as much a lie as the day it was first told. This, we argue, is ultimately what condemns both the Calvinist and today's Orthodox models. They have both ignored (and continue to actively fight against) the possibility **that damnation may actually be finite!** We won't go into the proof here but there are many other books and documents which the reader can consult which explain this truth.¹⁸ For now we would just like the reader to entertain the possibility: What if "damnation" is finite? What would it mean to our beliefs, our view of God and the eternal destiny of mankind?

Paul, having set the stage by discussing God's sovereignty, now illustrates why he brought the subject up in the first place. He introduces a truly heretical idea—at least it was in his day: that God was interested in saving not only the progeny of Israel—but also the Gentiles of the world (verse 24) i.e. the rest of the nations of the Earth. (Come to think of it, that is a pretty heretical idea today.) Paul explains the mechanics of God's plan for Israel and the nations in these three chapters. He notes that Israel pursued their relationship with God based on obtaining righteousness through the works of the Law and, therefore, failed to attain it¹⁹ while the Gentiles (9:31), having pursued righteousness by faith have

obtained it! To make sure he is understood clearly, he asks rhetorically, “Why, did they fail?” “Because,” the apostle answers, “they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works” (9:32). They stumbled over the stone set in Zion, Jesus Christ (verses 32-33). They would NOT accept God’s salvation for them based on His terms. So they failed to obtain the righteousness God wanted them to have. (It seems to us that mankind has never really accepted God on God’s terms, even to this day).

Paul then spends all of chapter 10 describing the unceasing anguish he has over his fellow Israelites.²⁰ He ends the chapter quoting plaintively, **“All day long I (God) have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”** This obstinacy, it turns out, was part of God’s plan! One might think at this point that Paul was going to write his kinsmen off. But he doesn’t!

I won’t keep you in suspense, but a key element of this plan is revealed in chapter 11; God has brought the Gentiles into God’s affection to rouse Israel’s jealousy. How and when this aroused jealousy is to take place commentators disagree on. The key point to note here is that both groups of people obtain God’s favor, that is, His mercy. Jews and Gentiles alike, the saved and the lost are blessed. The Gentile nations²¹ of the Earth—find themselves the unexpected recipients of God’s sovereign mercy. They receive this mercy without even fully understanding the plan. Paul admonishes these newly engrafted Gentile branches not to get cocky about their newly found favor and elevated status. He grants that these wild branches have been and are currently grafted into the root of Israel because of Christ, but, amazingly, God is able (and will) regraft Israel—the broken branches—back into their original root. (When God is finished, that will be one gloriously-full tree!) Think of it—God’s ultimate plan was to use rebellious Israel as a tool to engraft the Gentile nations into Him thus saving them. Then God plans to regraft in the broken branches of Israel. Paul reveals that it was always God’s ultimate plan to save all of Israel (verse 26). Israel, Scripture records, has been dispersed and mixed throughout all the nations of the Earth.

Thus, by saving Israel, God saves the rest of the nations too! Neat, huh? The incredible result is that God fulfills His promise to Abraham issued so many centuries before.²²

In the end, God cleans up. He wins everything back to Himself—both those who He foreknew and those people **“who are not my people”** (Romans 9:25). Leave it to our God—as He so typical of doing—to craft a plan so amazing that no one would suspect what He is fully up to. And God—being true to His own principles—brings good out of evil—to use the disobedience of a few men (Israel) to actually bless all nations. God, therefore, overcomes all of mankind’s evil with His immeasurable goodness (Romans 12:21).

Just when we can barely catch our collective breath, Paul drops the following bomb on us in Romans 11:32: **“For God (who?) has bound all mankind over to stubborn disobedience that He may have mercy** (not judgment or damnation) **on them all.”** (We suspect that there are too few Christians who have mediated on the full meaning of this verse, or are not aware of its existence.) The conclusion we draw here can only amaze our critics; it was ***always*** a part of God’s plan to create an environment in which men and women were free to expose their real essences—however sinful they might be—in order to shower mercy on them all! As already noted, our world is a place where **“sin reigns in death”** (Romans 5:21). Every day the graveyards of this world continue to fill and the crematoria continue to reduce to ashes former members of the human family. Death, without respite, continues culling members of the human race. There is, it appears, no end in sight. Yet it was God who subjected **“the creation to frustration”** (Romans 8:20). But even here, in defiance of death, Paul argues that this subjection was done **“in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God** (Romans 8:22).” Thus we see that God’s plan included subjecting His creation to the bondage to decay and allowing sin to reign in death. (Yet it is equally true that

it also God's plan to liberate this very same creation and, one day, to destroy Death (1 Cor. 15:26).

These observations concerning the current phase of God's plan continue, like God's working in wrath and hate mentioned above, to be true **for now**. This is mankind's current reality in accordance with the "evil age" we live in (Gal. 1:4). It is during this time, **now**, that God hates Esau and works against him and molds him into a vessel of wrath. It is **now**, while death reigns over the affairs of mankind that God's wrath still has work to do. But—and here is the key point—**now** is **NOT forever**. Some day the need for the training we are all under will come to an end. The need for having Esau as an enemy in God's plan **will come** to an end. The time when the need for the destruction of a Pharaoh and his armies, **will come** to an end. The time **will come** when there will no longer be a need for any vessel of wrath to exist. They, like the vessels of mercy, **will** have assumed a new identity—members of God's eternal family. The time **will come** when the full restoration to God of His entire creation **will take place!** This God has promised! It **will** take place or God's word is breakable. Jesus was lifted up to draw all mankind to Himself.²³ That **will** occur because He has purposed²⁴ to do so. Who are we to say otherwise?

Now, perhaps, we can begin to see why it doesn't really matter about God's election of some as vessels of wrath and others as vessels of mercy—because all vessels created by God are needed to play the roles He selected for them and because, in the end, all these vessels will be restored to their blessed and loving Creator. God plays the role of "hating" Esau to cause Esau to fulfill his divine role—whatever that role turns out to be. **Yet Paul assures us that God's actions against Esau are no different than the actions He takes on behalf of Jacob insofar as their ultimate outcome is concerned because the end result is that God will have mercy on them both.**²⁵

What can be the purpose of this mercy other than to return to Himself Jacob and Esau, Israel and the nations, the saved and the lost? Perhaps, this is why

Jesus hinted cryptically that many who are first (Jacob) will be last and those who are last (Esau) will be first. It doesn't matter in which order God has chosen to do things; what matters is that God is ultimately just and that His plan is to ultimately bless and restore all mankind. We are told in Scripture that God's mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13).

Thus, the only correct way to resolve the dilemma of Romans 9:22-23 is to put God's hatred of Esau, the destruction of Pharaoh, and the destruction of the vessels of wrath into the larger context of His love—a love which prompted Him to launch His ultimately glorious plan to restore all that is lost to Him. Secondly this discordant Orthodox belief in which the myriads of the lost are damned eternally must be corrected. We are forced to conclude that God's "damnation"—contrary to the teachings of Orthodox churches today—is not infinite. In fact, we believe that God's anger is but for a moment and that His mercy endures forever.²⁶ And yet all of this, every bit of it—from the properties of the atoms in the atomic table to a future we cannot even begin to imagine—was just a part of His carefully crafted and sovereign plan—a plan conceived long before time began! The writer of Hebrews, in chapter 11 verse 3, hints at this intimate level of planning and design when God **"framed the ages."** (Interestingly, the author of Hebrews uses the same verb, *katartizoo*, we discussed earlier in this paper)! No wonder Paul is caught up in such glorious praise for God and His loving-kindness toward mankind. Paul closes chapter 11 asserting that, "For **from** Him, and **through** Him, and **to** Him" are **all things**; the same "all things," Paul declares, that God works out according to His determinant counsel. (Eph 1:11) "Things", as referred here to by Paul, includes all people, time, and space." The problem with Orthodox Christianity, at least as it seems to us, is that they read this verse and substitute the word "some" for "all." What do you say, dear reader? Do you think Paul really meant "some" when he wrote "all?" For us, our course is clear. We have no more trouble believing that **"all"** things will be returned to God anymore than Jesus,

when He was lifted up, drew “**all** mankind to Himself,” mankind being a subset of the “all things.” (John 12:32) What do you say reader?

In closing, we hope you will stop and evaluate carefully what you believe about God’s character and His ultimate plan for all mankind. In light of the Scriptures, we can only conclude that there is no room for eternal damnation in God’s word and we hope you will come to believe as we do that Romans 9:22-23 proves it! We also hope you will come to see that God’s love, in context, can even play the role of enemy—for a finite amount of time to those He will one day restore.

Objection 1) *Still isn’t any damnation that God has caused by His election a negative reflection on Him?*

Jesus has already covered this objection by asserting that there will be people who did things deserving “many stripes” but will get only a “few.”²⁷ Likewise, some of His servants who failed to do the work He required of them will be beaten with more stripes. The key point to notice here is that in neither case is the punishment eternal!

Plus, there is no clear argument in Scripture that punishment meted out by God must be hundreds, thousands or even millions of years in duration. What we can be sure is that God will mete out whatever punishment is appropriate for every individual ***with the ultimate goal of restoring the individual***. In fact, we are convinced that everyone will accept God’s judgment and sentence on his or her life, knowing full well, that once their sentence has been completed, they will be eternally restored to Him. Myriads of people will have Saul/Paul type conversions when they are ushered into His presence for the first time. **What they have suffered and learned while on Earth will have prepared them for reconciliation and will only drive each toward the God of Israel, their affections now fully educated and engaged, to the ultimate rejoicing of all.**

In summary then, there is no way out of this dilemma for those who advocate that man is in the driver seat of his own destruction. Destruction, as well

as salvation and restitution, are, and remain, the sole responsibility and work of God and are implemented at His discretion. For those who believe that damnation must be eternal, the truth of Romans 9:22 is an intolerable one because those trapped in Orthodox tradition have to reconcile an infinite loving God with His role in eternal damnation. To those who continue to believe that damnation is eternal, the nicest thing we can hope for you is that you and your loved ones never encounter the destruction you so strongly believe in.

¹ Romans 9:13 some members of the clergy, writers and apologists have tried to water down “hate” in this verse to mean, “love less,” but we see no reason to do so. In the first place, to “love less” is not the proper translation from the underlying Greek. The Greek word is *miseo*. Thus it is a man cannot serve two masters; for either he will **hate** the one ... **Matt. 6:24**. So Jesus contrasts love and hate when He asserts, “You have heard that it has been said, you shall love thy neighbor and **hate** your enemy...” **Matt.5:43**. If you soften the meaning in Romans 9:13, why shouldn’t we water it down in other passages? Yes, at first glance, we are deeply troubled at the thought that God would hate anything He has created. Yet such behavior makes sense if it is considered in the broader context of His ultimate plan. God acts toward Esau in a way that can only be classified as hateful. Stop for a moment and ask yourself, what it would mean for God to show hatred toward someone. I mean short of obliterating the individual—or even a nation—how would God exhibit such an emotion except through some overt behavior? It is really no more difficult a concept to understand than to see that for God to show hatred toward an individual, all He has to do is to **NOT** show favor toward the individual. What if the people God favored were guided providentially—or even outright—to live in lands that enjoyed a beneficial climate? What if the people God favored were led to such a place that received plenty of sunshine and rain, and the soils were good? What would we think if such people enjoyed continual success in their labors, in their fertility for both man and animal? What if these same people lived largely at peace and, yet, were victorious in battle. How would we describe such people? Would we not say that they were blessed? Conversely, what if Esau’s progeny were forced to live in barren lands and under relatively harsh conditions? What if Esau’s progeny were constantly at war with themselves—when they were not fighting outsiders? What if Esau’s crops were to fail more often than those to whom God shows favor? Would we not conclude that they were cursed in some way or another? Might we not even conclude that, at best, God’s wrath, or at worst, God’s hatred remained on them? Thus, it can be argued, that, where God is concerned, not showing favor is equivalent to Him showing hatred. Having God’s favor really is having something quite wonderful. Not having it really is something quite disastrous. The good news is, as pointed out above, God’s enmity toward Esau is NOT forever. God will treat Esau in this manner not one moment longer than he needs to be treated for God’s plan to reach fruition. And further, it was NOT because of something Esau did or deserved. God’s purpose in election, writes Paul, must stand—just because it is God’s election. He has a sovereign right to do as He wishes. It is not out of spite that God treats Esau—and by extension, any vessel of wrath—in such a fashion. The evil God shows towards those He hates has a divine purpose. We must observe that when God planted the tree in the garden it was a tree of dual-purpose: to provide knowledge of both good and evil. Adam—and we—needs to be educated to appreciate God’s goodness and to prepare us for an eternal future. But to appreciate goodness you have to have something to contrast it against; this is the role of evil. But if there is a role for evil in God’s creation—while we can rejoice that it will only be temporary—we must also accept that some must and will play that role in this world. It is against the backdrop provided by the almost infinite

combination of people, time, place, thought and interaction with others—some good, some horrifically evil—that humans learn to run from evil and to cling to that which is good. It is a plan that must work for those who know the Lord as well as the billions who don't—to those myriads who never knew His name. In closing, we should also observe that if He loved others less, then, that implies He shows favoritism. Most Christians, we suspect, would rather hack off a limb than accuse God of showing partiality or favoritism.

² 1 Peter 3:15

³ 1 John 4:16

⁴ Still others who realize the impossibility of explaining their beliefs will end up mumbling through some nonsensical response in the hopes that the listener or reader won't detect the weakness of their argument or their intellectual dishonesty. Thomas Talbot (*The Inescapable Love of God*) recites just such an example as he reviewed one writing by J.I. Packer. See pp. 111-113. He concludes his thoughts in that section by writing, "So he [Packer] ends up trying to conceal his position, even as he articulates it, behind a curtain of ambiguous and confusing language." Fans of the animated sitcom *King of the Hill* may find this description to be a great description of the character Boomhauer. Boomhauer has seemingly mastered the fine art of vocalizing without really saying anything. Now Boomhauer does what he does for comic effect and with no ill will. Talbot observes that you cannot easily give the benefit of doubt to such as Mr. Packer.

⁵ <http://www.tentmaker.org/articles/EternalPunishment-IsItReallyofGod.html> Mr. Lee Salisbury notes one extreme example of such thinking when he writes, "...Queen Mary (1516-1558) of England, who won her title "Bloody Mary" by torturing and murdering non Catholics. She justified her actions, proclaiming "as the souls of heretics are to be hereafter eternally burning in hell, there can be nothing more proper than for me to imitate the divine vengeance by burning them on earth." Bloody Mary's image of God lives on today."

⁶ Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*. Erdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge U.K., p. 69.

⁷ Several years ago I reviewed some numbers tabulated in the 1987 Encyclopedia Britannica concerning religious populations around the planet. What the numbers showed is that, roughly, at a minimum 80 percent of the world's population is NOT Christian. Orthodox Christianity has nothing to say about these unfortunate people except that they are lost—and lost forever. By numerical appearances alone, it would appear that God's plan isn't working too well.

⁸ John 6:12 It is interesting to note that only John recorded this intimate detail, suggesting, perhaps, that John remembered this detail because he was there when it happened.

⁹ Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Henry Commentary in One Volume*. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 1777.

¹⁰ Galatians 2:6, et.al.

¹¹ Thayer, Joseph H., *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 336.

¹² Wallace, Daniel B., *An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Zondervan Publishing House Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 417-18

¹³ Our friend Leo Boyle has often asked this question. No one has yet given him a satisfactory answer.

¹⁴ Romans 5:21 describes our environment bluntly. "... so that as Sin reigned in Death..." and "Nevertheless, Death reigned from Adam to Moses..." When coupled together these two ideas paint a powerful portrait of just how lost this world is. It is literally satiated with the sickness of sin. Sin, like Death, maintains an iron grip on all of humanity. Only Jesus Christ has broken the grip. Yet, until He decides to abolish Death, Death and Sin will continue to reign.

¹⁵ Revelation 21:5

¹⁶ At this point, I would encourage the reader to entertain the following proposition while studying the Book of Romans, particularly in chapters 9, 10 and 11 and the thoughts penned herein. Treat these chapters, although marked as individual chapters, as parts of a single discussion or theme.

¹⁷ Ephesians 1:11-12 clearly states, "In Him, according to the purpose of Him **who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will**...His glory. (RSV) This amazing verse asserts that God has devised His sovereign plan for mankind according to his determinate will! He didn't consult with men to see if they wanted to be saved or even made. What area has God restricted His planning to? "To All Things," writes the inspired apostle. Everything. The human mind has no capacity to study the depths of God's planning ability. Yet, we are to believe in faith that God's plan covers everything!

¹⁸ See for example *The Inescapable Love Of God* by Thomas Tolbert;

¹⁹ We don't have room to go into it in this paper, but the vast majority of Christendom is, to this very day, teaching a works oriented salvation. It is as repugnant to God now as it was then.

²⁰ Romans 10:17 It is interesting to note how important a role context plays in understanding Biblical exegesis. A classic example of this occurs here. I've heard for years more times than I care to recall, that "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." There is just one problem with this belief: it isn't true. When one looks at all three chapters it becomes evident that only God can cause the human heart to respond. People won't respond unless God draws them (John 6:44, 6:65). Preaching of the Gospel can only plant the seeds for human response. Only God can cause the seeds to grow, or, as Paul puts it, "God gives the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:7). Yet thousands of Christian teachers and preachers continue to preach this verse—totally out of context.

²¹ Amazingly, too many Christians don't see God's heart when God sent Jonah to Nineveh. The text is very clear. God entered into no other covenants with any other people on this Earth but Israel. Yet, hundreds of years before God expanded the promises He gave to Abraham through Christ, we find God sending a prophet to His own covenant people's worst enemy! God's overture toward the Assyrians was a prototype for things to come. Sadly, too many just dismiss the events of the book of Jonah as a historical curiosity.

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- ²² Genesis 12:2-3
 - ²³ John 12:32
 - ²⁴ Ephesians 1:11
 - ²⁵ Romans 11:32
 - ²⁶ Psalms 103:8-14
 - ²⁷ Luke 12:47-48