

## Session 10: Vessels of Mercy

Romans 9 · Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

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**Discovery Aim.** The group meets the letter's hardest chapter without flinching: Paul's anguish for Israel, God's freedom in election from Isaac to Pharaoh, the potter and the clay, and the vessels of wrath and mercy. By tracing the potter image to its source and the hardening to its Exodus sequence, the group discovers that God's sovereignty in this chapter is the sovereignty of persistent mercy, not arbitrary doom, and that chapter 9 is a sentence that does not end until chapter 11.

**Catholic Touchstone.** The Church's fixed points hold the chapter's live wires: God truly and freely elects, and his initiative is prior to all merit; Christ died for all without exception (CCC 605); and "God predestines no one to go to hell" (CCC 1037). Within those walls, the Church permits her theologians room the internet does not: tonight the group learns to read the hardest texts inside the walls.

### What You Need to Know

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First, insist on the unit: chapters 9, 10, and 11 are one argument, answering the objection planted in 3:1-8: if Israel, the covenant people, has largely not believed, has the word of God failed (9:6)? Any reading of chapter 9 that could not survive 11:32 ("that he may have mercy upon all") has broken the argument in half. Second, insist on the tone: the chapter opens not with a decree but a lament: "great sorrow and unceasing anguish," Paul wishing himself "accursed and cut off from Christ" for his kinsmen's sake (9:2-3), a Moses-like offer (Ex 32:32). Whatever election means here, the elect apostle responds to it by offering to trade places with the lost. Hold that posture all night; it is the interpretive key the loudest readings skip.

The argument then runs: not all descended from Israel are Israel (9:6); the promise ran through Isaac, not Ishmael, and Jacob, not Esau, "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call" (9:11). God tells Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy" (9:15, quoting Ex 33:19), "so it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy" (9:16); he hardened Pharaoh (9:17-18); and to the protester: "who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Has the potter no right over the clay?" (9:20-21). Then the carefully weighted sentence your group must read with a jeweler's loupe: God "endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" (9:22-23). Note three things the sentence actually says: the wrath-vessels are endured with much patience (and the group learned in 2:4 what God's patience is for: repentance); the mercy-vessels God "prepared beforehand," with God as the stated preparer; and of the wrath-vessels Paul writes only that they are "made for destruction," conspicuously not saying God made them so. Many careful readers, ancient and modern, have heard that asymmetry as deliberate. Do not overclaim it as a proof; present it as what the text does and does not say.

Know the map of positions before the steelman. The Calvinist reading (unconditional election to glory and reprobation, individual and eternal, decided apart from anything foreseen in the person) takes the chapter's strongest verbs at face value and deserves its full day in court. The Catholic walls: God's electing initiative is real, prior, and unmerited (the chapter and Trent agree); God wills all to be saved and Christ died for all without exception (1 Tim 2:4; CCC 605, quoting the Council of Quiercy: there is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer); no one is predestined to hell (CCC 1037); and hardening in Scripture is judicial, a handing-over that ratifies refusal (the group will trace Pharaoh's own

sequence). Within the walls, how election works is a question the Church has declined to settle between her schools (the *de auxiliis* controversy closed without a verdict); CCC 600 fixes the frame: God's eternal plan embraces each person's free response. Also keep election's biblical texture in view: Isaac, Jacob, and Pharaoh are elected or hardened for roles in salvation history, and the chapter's horizon is peoples and mission as much as individual destinies, though it cannot be reduced to that alone. Honesty in both directions is tonight's discipline.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

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**Jeremiah 18:1-11.** Paul's potter is borrowed, and the source passage is the session's depth charge: at the potter's house, the vessel is spoiled and reworked, and God explains the image himself: if a nation against which he has spoken "turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended" (Jer 18:8). In its own context, the potter image teaches responsive sovereignty: the clay's turning changes the outcome. A discovery passage; guard it with your life.

**Exodus 8-9: the hardening sequence.** Before Scripture says God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex 9:12), it says, repeatedly, that Pharaoh hardened his own (Ex 8:15, 8:32). The order is the theology: hardening is God's judicial confirmation of a refusal already chosen, the Exodus cousin of "God gave them up" (1:24). A discovery passage; the group traces the order themselves.

## Voices of the Church

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### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies on Romans, teaches in substance that this chapter must be read from its first verses: Paul weeps before he argues, and the argument defends God's wisdom in mercy, not caprice. On the hard sayings, St. John Chrysostom holds that God's foreknowledge and human freedom do not compete: God's choices are neither arbitrary nor blind, and Pharaoh was not made wicked by God but, persisting in wickedness, was used and confirmed in the path he chose. St. John Chrysostom's reading is one honored school, not a definition; but his instinct, that the chapter vindicates God's justice rather than suspending it, is the Church's.

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

St. Thomas Aquinas, treating predestination in the *Summa Theologiae*, teaches in substance a set of fixed points the Church has made her own: God's love does not find goodness, it creates it, so whatever good is in Jacob, or in anyone, God's choice put there, and no one may boast; predestination to glory is real and utterly gratuitous; and the loss of the lost is never God's doing in the way glory is his doing: God permits defection and punishes sin, but the fault originates wholly in the creature. Grace and glory trace to God as their cause; sin traces to us. Thomas's precise system is one permitted school; these asymmetries are the faith.

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

His biographers recount that as a student in Paris, St. Francis de Sales fell into months of black despair, convinced he was predestined to damnation; the crisis broke when he knelt before an image of Our Lady, prayed the Memorare, and surrendered the question, and the fear lifted, his early biographers recount, after weeks of darkness. The man who came out of that darkness became a Doctor of the Church who

taught God's universal saving will with special force, teaching in substance that God's desire for each soul's salvation is more certain than our fears, and that the practical answer to the abyss of predestination is not calculation but trust. He is the patron of everyone this chapter has ever kept awake.

## Catechism Connection

**CCC 605.** The wall against every limited-atonement reading, quoting the Council of Quiercy: "There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer." Whatever election means, it cannot mean some were never died for.

**CCC 1037.** "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end." Any predestination to hell is outside the walls (CCC 1037): God predestines no one there, and final loss requires the creature's persevering no.

**CCC 600** (carried over from last session, because it governs this one): God's eternal plan of predestination "includes in it each person's free response to his grace." One sentence; keep it in the room all night.

### THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

**Has God's word failed?** The 3:1-8 objection, planted in Session 3 with "Let God be true," now gets its three-chapter answer. Tonight opens it (9:6); Session 11 resolves it (11:29, 32). Do not resolve it early.

**Patience vocabulary.** "Endured with much patience" (9:22) verbally recalls 2:4 (kindness meant to lead to repentance) and conceptually parallels 1:24 (gave them up). Let the group make the connection in Build; it reframes the vessels sentence.

**To the Jew first: cresting.** The ordering planted in 1:16 and 2:9-10 becomes the whole subject for three sessions. Name the arc once.

**Assurance tension: still open.** Last week promised the olive tree; it comes next session (11:20-22). If tonight's material stirs the eternal-security question again, hold the line: one more week.

## Session Goals

1. The group can state why chapters 9-11 are one argument and what question they answer (9:6; 3:1-8).
2. The group discovers Jeremiah 18 and the Exodus hardening sequence, and can explain judicial hardening and responsive sovereignty from the sources.
3. The group can read 9:22-23 precisely: the patience, the asymmetry, and what the text does and does not say.
4. The group can recite the Church's three walls (election real and unmerited; Christ died for all; no one predestined to hell) and knows the space inside them is legitimately open.

## Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 12 min
- Build questions 1-2 (the lament; election from Isaac to Moses): 22 min

- Build questions 3-4 with the Exodus and Jeremiah discoveries: 26 min
- Steelman chain: 15 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer: 15 min

**If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts:** drop the Dig Deeper box, and compress 9:30-33 (the stumbling stone) to a two-sentence bridge into next session. Never cut the discoveries or the steelman answer; without them the chapter is a wound.

## Session 10: Vessels of Mercy

Romans 9 · Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

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*Father, tonight we open the chapter we would have skipped. Give us Paul's tears before Paul's arguments, reverence before your freedom, and honesty before your word. Where you have spoken, let us hear; where you have not, keep us from inventing; and in everything show us the mercy this chapter is actually about. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

### Win

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1. Is there someone whose salvation you ache over? (No names needed.) What does that ache do to your prayers?
2. What is a question about God you have been afraid to ask out loud? Tonight is a good night for it.

### Build

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**Read Romans 9:1-5 aloud.**

1. Before a single hard doctrine, what do we get from Paul? Weigh 9:3 word by word: what is he willing to trade, and for whom? What does this opening demand of every reading of the rest of the chapter?

#### ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

We get grief: "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (9:2), and an offer that should stop the room: "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren" (9:3): the man who just wrote that nothing can separate him from Christ's love (8:39) volunteering for separation if it would save his kinsmen. It is Moses' offer at Sinai ("blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book," Ex 32:32). The demand this makes on interpretation: whatever election means in the verses ahead, it produced in the elect not smugness but self-sacrificial anguish for the non-elect. Any reading of Romans 9 that makes a Christian shrug at the lost has failed the chapter's first test, administered by its own author in its first breath.

2. Read 9:6-16. Trace Paul's cases: Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad" (9:11). What is Paul proving with the before-birth timing, and what does 9:16 conclude? Concede what must be conceded.

#### ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The before-birth timing proves the choice owed nothing to the chosen: "not because of works but because of his call" (9:11), "not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy" (9:16). Concede it fully, because it is Catholic doctrine: God's initiative is first, free, and unmerited; nobody's story with God begins with their own resume, a truth this study has confessed since Genesis 15. Note also what the cases are: Isaac, Jacob, and Pharaoh are chosen or bypassed for roles in the unfolding plan ("the elder will serve the younger," 9:12, quoting Gen 25:23 about two nations), and Esau the man is never said to be damned. Election in these verses is God's sovereign right to route salvation history as he wills. Whether it also settles individual eternal destinies apart from any response is exactly the question the steelman will

press, so do not resolve it here; establish only what all Catholics affirm: grace is first, and God owes no one his plan's leading roles.

**Read Romans 9:17-18 aloud.**

**Discovery moment.** Say: "'He hardens the heart of whomever he wills' (9:18), and the case is Pharaoh. But Exodus tells the hardening as a sequence, and the order matters. Split up and find three verses: Exodus 8:15, Exodus 8:32, and Exodus 9:12. Read them in order and report who hardens what, when."

**ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Exodus 8:15: "But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart." Exodus 8:32: "But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also." Only then Exodus 9:12: "But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh." In the narrative's unfolding, Pharaoh hardens first, repeatedly, against plague after relented plague, and God's hardening arrives as judicial confirmation of a refusal already entrenched. Be accurate about the whole data: God announces in advance that he will harden (Ex 4:21; 7:3), and some notices leave the agency unstated; the traditional reading holds announcement and sequence together: God's foretold hardening works through, and ratifies, Pharaoh's own. Your group has seen this divine judgment before: it is "God gave them up" (1:24, 26, 28) wearing Egyptian dress. Scripture's hardening, so read, is not the manufacture of a fresh evil in an innocent heart but the terrible ratification of a chosen one; God is never the author of sin, and how his causality and creaturely freedom mesh remains a mystery her schools dispute. Even so, keep Paul's edge: God remains free to use the hardened Pharaoh for the Exodus and his name's glory (9:17). Sovereignty is not diminished by being just.

**Read Romans 9:19-24 aloud, slowly.**

**Discovery moment.** Say: "The potter and the clay (9:20-21) is not Paul's invention; a prophet was sent to a potter's house to learn it, and God himself explains the image there. Find the potter's house at the start of Jeremiah 18, and read through verse 11. What can the clay do in the original?"

**ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Jeremiah 18:1-11. The vessel is spoiled; the potter reworks it into another vessel; and God interprets: "can I not do with you as this potter has done?... If at any time I declare concerning a nation... that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation... turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it" (18:6-8), and the reverse for a blessed nation that turns to evil. In its source, the potter image teaches sovereign responsiveness: the potter's absolute right over the clay is exercised through engagement with the clay's turning. Now reread 9:22-23 with the loupe: the vessels of wrath God "endured with much patience," and your group knows from 2:4 what God's patience is meant to produce: repentance; the vessels of mercy God "prepared beforehand for glory," with God named as preparer; and of the wrath-vessels the text says only "made for destruction," without naming God as their maker in that state. Many careful readers hear the sentence giving glory its author and destruction its silence. Present that as a reading the grammar invites, not more: Paul asserts God's absolute right and God's actual patience in the same breath, and patience is not the behavior of a potter who wanted the vessel broken.

## Steelman: Unconditional Election, All the Way Down

**Build it at full strength.** Say to the group: "Here is the Calvinist reading, and it is the most serious steelman this study will ever build, because it is built from tonight's verses at face value. Before the twins were born, without regard to anything done good or bad, God loved Jacob and hated Esau; the apostle's own conclusion is that salvation depends not on human will or exertion but on God's mercy alone; God hardens whom he wills; and when human fairness objects, Paul does not soothe it, he silences it: who are you, O man? The potter makes from one lump vessels for honor and vessels for destruction, and the clay has no appeal. On this reading, God unconditionally elects some to glory and passes over the rest, for his own glory, and our part is to tremble and adore. And be honest," say to the group, "doesn't Paul sound more like this than like our softer paraphrases of him?" Let it stand at its full, terrible height. Then press.

3. Press: You have four instruments from tonight and seven weeks of the letter. Apply them: the lament (9:1-3), the Exodus order, the potter's own house, and the patience of 9:22 read with 2:4. Then set the walls: what has the Church fixed, and what has she left open?

### ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Apply the instruments. The lament: the reading must produce Paul's tears and trade-places love, not serenity about the lost; a decree-and-done theology struggles to weep like 9:3. The Exodus order: Scripture's own hardening sequence shows judicial confirmation of chosen refusal, not fresh evil planted in the innocent. The potter's house: Jeremiah 18, the image's fullest prophetic home (Isaiah's potter texts, 29:16 and 45:9, stand nearby), is Scripture's great proof that when the nation the clay figures turns, the vessel's fate changes. The patience: God endures wrath-vessels "with much patience," and this letter has already defined God's patience as the space made for repentance (2:4); patience is unintelligible if the outcome was fixed with no door. Add the argument's own ending, two chapters ahead: branches broken for unbelief can be grafted back in (11:23), and the conclusion of the whole unit is mercy upon all (11:32). Then the walls, honestly stated: the Church affirms with Paul that election is real, prior, and unmerited, and that the predestination of the elect to glory is God's free grace (concede the steelman its true core); and she fixes what the steelman's full system breaks: Christ suffered for every human being without exception (CCC 605), and "God predestines no one to go to hell" (CCC 1037): final loss requires the creature's own persevering refusal. Inside those walls, how grace and freedom interlock, the Church's schools have argued for centuries with her blessing (CCC 600), and tonight's group is not required to finish that argument. What no one may do is read chapter 9 without chapters 10 and 11, and those are the next two weeks.

### DIG DEEPER

**The stumbling stone (9:30-33).** The chapter's last movement quietly changes registers: why did Israel not attain? Not, in the end, a decree, but a stumble: "they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works" (9:32), tripping over the stone God laid in Zion. Paul fuses two Isaiah oracles (28:16 and 8:14): the same stone is sanctuary or stumbling block depending on how it is met, and "he who believes in him will not be put to shame" (9:33). After forty verses of God's freedom, the chapter's final word is an open door with a human hinge: believes. Chapter 10 walks through it.

## Send

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1. Paul's election produced anguish and intercession for the lost. What does yours produce? Who needs your 9:3 kind of praying this week?
2. Where do you need to let God be the potter right now: a plan, a timeline, a role you would not have chosen? What would surrendered clay do this week?

## Live It This Week

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- Choose one person far from God and pray for them by name every day this week, with something of Paul's 9:3 seriousness; consider fasting once for them.
- Pray the Memorare once this day this week that predestination or scrupulosity troubles you, and hand St. Francis de Sales's question to Our Lady as he did.
- Reread Jeremiah 18:1-11 once, and answer the potter's question in writing: what is God currently reworking in you, and are you turning?

## Memory Verse

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*"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame."*

**Romans 9:33 (RSV2CE)**

## Closing Prayer

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*Sovereign Lord, potter of nations and of us, we do not answer back; we hand you the clay. Thank you that your patience means a door, that your Son suffered for every soul without exception, and that no one is lost but by refusing you to the end. Give us tears for the lost like Paul's, and keep the ones we love from stumbling over the Stone. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Session 10: Vessels of Mercy

*Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order*

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- Romans 9:1-5 (read aloud: the lament; accursed for my brethren; cf. Ex 32:32)
- Romans 9:6-16 (read: Isaac, Jacob and Esau before birth; Ex 33:19 quoted; not of man's will but God's mercy; cf. Gen 25:23, Mal 1:2-3)
- Romans 9:17-18 (Pharaoh; hardens whom he wills)
- Exodus 8:15, 8:32, 9:12 (discovery passages: the hardening order; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 9:19-24 (read slowly: who are you, O man; potter and clay; vessels of wrath endured with patience, vessels of mercy prepared for glory)
- Jeremiah 18:1-11 (discovery passage: the potter's house and the turning clay; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 9:30-33 (Dig Deeper: the stumbling stone, Isa 28:16 + 8:14; bridge to ch. 10)
- CCC 605, 1037, 600 (Catechism Connection)
- Memory verse: Romans 9:33