

## **Why does God tolerate the Hitler's of the world?**

April 25, 2010 - Romans 9:22-24

“Doing good and working hard leads to rewards and opportunity. Doing bad and working on evil leads to consequences and loss of privileges.” Many of our parents taught us this basic understanding of the way the world works. But then we travel along in life and see things that sometimes don't fall in with these basic rules.

We may see bullies doing bad and gaining from it. They get someone else to do their homework. They get the nicest place to sit in the cafeteria. They get their way. So we wonder what happened to “doing bad leads to consequences and loss of privilege.” We may go to work and see someone cheating to meet their performance standards. Or we see someone cheating on a test. They don't get caught and they advance. We have to reshape our understanding to something like “Doing good and working hard *often* leads to rewards and opportunity. Doing bad *sometimes* leads to consequences and loss of privilege.

Then we watch the news and see a dictator isolate his country and starve his people. We see millions displaced and suffering because of a government's desire to get rid of that ethnic group or gain more territory. We see our understanding of the world violated on a grand scale.

Then we consider what we've been taught about God. He is supposed to be good and all powerful. If He is, why does He tolerate these unjust situations? Why did God allow Adolf Hitler to be born and grow up and take power? Why did God tolerate that 12 year reign of terror? Why Stalin or Pol Pot, Rwanda and Darfur? Why does He put up with terrorists and those who kill Christians? We believe God is all powerful and could stop the suffering. Yet He doesn't. Why does God endure the Hitler's of the world? How would you answer someone who asked you such a question?

I'm here to tell you friends, that there are some very good answers to these tough questions. The Bible text we're looking at today gives them to us. They will not completely resolve our issues with this question. But they give us a glimpse into the mysterious yet wondrous ways of God in this crazy world. I believe by the end of our time together, you'll have at least two good answers to the question “Why does God tolerate the Hitler's of the world?” We'll see part of God's tolerance has to do with us!

We return to the book of Romans today. The apostle Paul wrote this letter to Christians living in Rome. It seems they weren't organized into a church yet. It seems there were independent pockets of Christians throughout the city because he addresses them as "All in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." We think one purpose for this letter was to bring Christians in Rome together especially Jewish Christians and non-Jewish (or Gentile) Christians. One thing they had in common was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So Paul sets out to explain the Gospel. He's not ashamed of it because it's the power of God unto salvation for all who believe, the Jew first and also the Greek. Then he explained why anyone needed salvation and a Gospel or good news: All have sinned and fall short of God's glory. All of us are by nature under sin and under God's just wrath. But God sent His Son Jesus to take the penalty for our sins on the cross. He bore God's wrath. So anyone who trusts in Christ is justified or declared "not guilty forever" before God.

We saw Paul address questions about this Gospel like, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? How come Christians still sin and live in bodies which desire sin? How do we live in light of the reality "there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus?" This led to his wonderful statements of assurance in chapter 8: God works for the good of those who love him; If God is for us, who can be against us and "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

But there was one more major question troubling Paul and perhaps others in Rome. What happened to the Jews? Why hadn't the people of God from the Old Testament collectively embraced Jesus as their Messiah? Some Jews trusted Christ as Messiah. But the vast majority didn't. So Paul addresses this in chapter 9. We were introduced to the doctrine of election there. We saw God do His electing work throughout history. Many questions about election were raised and answered.

And some of you are here today because the sign and newspaper asked the question "Why does God elect?" That is where I thought today's text led us. But today's text answers a different question. "Why does God tolerate the Hitler's of the world?" So, the message won't centrally focus on "Why does God elect?" We'll get to that more in the next two weeks. So, I'm sorry for the "false advertising." But it wasn't deliberate.

I just had to follow where the text led us. This text gives us two answers to the question “Why does God tolerate the Hitler’s of the world?” And then we will consider how we might respond to these truths about God.

Our text – Romans 9:14-24 – The key text is verses 22-24.

*Romans 9:14-24 (ESV)*

**14** What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! **15** For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” **16** So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. **17** For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” **18** So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

**19** You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” **20** But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” **21** Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? **22** What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, **23** in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— **24** even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

Our key text is verses 22-24. In the original Greek, those three verses form one sentence. Some Bible versions like the NIV, divide it into two sentences. But I’m reading from the English Standard Version today because I think you have to put the whole sentence together to get his point.

You’ll also notice this sentence forms a question. See the question mark at the end of verse 24?

So, what do we do with a question? Is this put in the form of a question because Paul really wonders this and tries to dip into the depths of this divine mystery? OR is he making the point through a rhetorical question which he presumes we will answer? We don’t know for sure. I think it’s both. I think he’s making his point through a question. It’s kind of like you’re trying to let a person discover a truth by giving them time to think or explore. But they’re not getting it. So, instead of telling the answer directly, you invite them to think about the answer in the form of a question. But I also think Paul could be recognizing the depth of this truth he points to. He’s trying to explain how God works in light of this troubling reality – really evil people seem to get away with stuff for a long time. So with that in mind let’s unpack Paul’s sentence.

### *The basic claim*

#### **God endures with much patience people destined for wrath. (9:22)**

God endures the Hitlers of the world for a time. Look at verse 22. “What if God desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” He’s just used the potter and clay image. He talked about the potter making vessels for honorable and r dishonorable uses out of the same lump of clay. The potter could make a serving bowl and garbage bowl out of the same lump of clay. The application would be out of the human race, some will receive God’s mercy and some will bear God’s wrath.

So in verse 22, he continues on with the potter image but adjusts it a little. He uses vessels again. The word “vessels” refers to people; people under God’s wrath; people who never trust Him; people who rebelled against Him; tyrants and dictators who carry out tremendously wicked deeds. Their actions offend God’s justice and holiness. They do things that violate His moral law. Yet He endures their existence and actions with much patience. So that’s the claim and that’s where I got the question – Why does God bear with the Hitler’s of our world?

#### **Why does God do this?**

**Answer 1 - To show the justice of His wrath and make know his power. (9:22).** Verse 22 begins “What if God desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power endured these people? Now doesn’t that seem odd? To show His wrath and make known His power, God is going to endure with much patience people destined for wrath. It seems backwards. You’d think the best way to show God’s wrath and make know His power would be for God to immediately respond with wrath and power to some injustice. God’s wrath is His intense holy hatred of sin which moves Him to justly punish it. Why would He with much patience endure those people?

I believe part of the reason is to show the justice of His wrath. That might happen in this life in a lesser degree. God’s wrath and power will certainly be on display to the full degree on Judgment Day.

How might this work? Well let's take the Nazis for example. They came to power in 1933. From what I have read, there were many people in Germany who were already concerned about the leadership and the things Hitler said. But say God overthrew them with His wrath and power in 1934 before they could implement much of their program. Well, some people might conclude that was a good thing. Others might say "the Nazis did a lot of good." There would be doubt about the correctness of God's wrath. And if the Nazis were not very strong internationally in 1934, it wouldn't say much about God's power to overthrow a shaky government. But fast forward 12 years to 1945 with the widespread discovery of the camps and war and millions of displaced people. There would be little doubt about the need for a just wrath against such leaders. That might be part of why God endures with patience those destined for wrath.

Or consider another angle. One military strategy is to give up some ground to gain a greater victory. Be willing to lose a battle so you can win a war. There is even a comment on the way the Romans fought in the ancient book of Maccabees. The account goes like this: "Now Judas heard of the fame of the Romans that they were very strong and were well disposed toward all who made an alliance with them. . . . Men told him of their wars and of the brave deeds which they were doing among the Gauls, how they had defeated them and forced them to pay tribute, and what they had done in the land of Spain to get control of the silver and gold mines there, and how they had gained control of the whole region by their planning and patience, even though the place was far distant from them." Then the modern commentator writes Here we see expressed what is commonly known: that in a conflict, a measure of patience and restraint at one point in the battle may secure a greater victory later.

We see this with God and Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus. God endured Pharaoh's taunts and stubbornness. Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, Yahweh, that I should listen to him?"

What happened as God patiently endured Pharaoh? God had multiple opportunities to display His power over each of the Egyptian gods through the plagues. But if God would have completely overwhelmed Egypt with the plague of blood on the Nile, the hearts and minds of the Egyptians would be undeterred. But 10 plagues later, they are begging the Israelites to leave and worship their God. Israel leaves Egypt. God

deliberately leads them on a route where they will be trapped. Why? Exodus 14:4: - And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." Then God displayed His power in the ultimate victory over the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. So God's enduring with great patience resulted in a multitude of victories and a great display of His power. When God overthrows those destined for wrath, the proud, arrogant, despots and tyrants, His power becomes more wide known and His name is glorified. That's the first answer to why God bears with the Hitler's of our day. They store up wrath for themselves and will one day reap all they have sowed.

The second answer is much more positive. Why does God bear with people destined for wrath? God patiently bears with people destined for His wrath **to make known the riches of His glory to Christians** like you and me. Verse 23 - *To make known the riches of His glory to vessels of mercy. Who are these vessels of mercy?* Verse 24 – Even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles. So part of the purpose for God enduring the "Hitler's" is to make known His glorious riches to Christians.

Now what are some examples of the riches of his glory? One is **the Gospel and our salvation.**

Imagine that God's patience ran out with Hitler. He decided that's enough. I am going bring time to an end in 1945. Jesus will return. Judgment will come and my wrath will pour out on those who rejected me like Hitler. If God did that, most of the people in this room would not be going to heaven. We were not born. Or if we were born, we might not have heard the Gospel yet. We would not see the riches of his glory if God had not endured people destined for destruction.

Another example of the riches of His glory is **the undeserved mercy we received from God.** We Christians are vessels of mercy. We do not deserve to be Christians. We did not deserve to be chosen or called or saved or transformed or bound for heaven. We did not do anything to make God choose us or save us. It's all mercy. We would not have received His mercy if He had not endured the tyrants and the rebels of history. We were once vessels under God's wrath. But God's mercy saved us.

Listen carefully to a passage some of you know well. But listen to what God has done.

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of the world, following the prince of the power in the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2: 1-10.

God rescued us and part of the reason He could do that was His enduring those destined for wrath. He rescued us out of that crowd. This past week’s Daily Bread gives a great picture of this rescue.

Philip Yancey writes *“Living in Colorado, I climb mountains. On summer weekends, I see casual hikers who have no idea what they are doing. In sandals, shorts and T-shirts, carrying a single container of water, they start up a trail at mid-morning. They have no map, no compass and no rain gear.*

*My neighbor, who volunteers for Alpine Rescue, has told me stories of tourists rescued from certain death after wandering off a trail. Regardless of the circumstances, Alpine Rescue always responds to a call for help. Not once have they lectured a hapless tourist, “Well, since you ignored the rules of the wilderness, you’ll just have to bear the consequences.” Their mission is rescue. They pursue every needy hiker, no matter how undeserving.*

*The central message of the Bible is one of rescue. Paul points out that none of us “deserve” God’s mercy and none of us can save ourselves. Like a stranded hiker, all we can do is call for help. The good news of the Gospel is that, in spite of our state, God seeks after us and responds to every plea for help. You might say*

*God is in the rescue business.* He rescued us because of His mercy. So, the Gospel and our salvation and His mercy are just the start of the riches of His glory.

### **How might we respond?**

- **Receive His mercy for the first time.**

God has allowed the world to continue to this day so that you might hear the Gospel. God has endured with patience those destined for wrath so that you might be saved. Will you scorn His patience?

What is the Gospel – All have sinned or violated God’s moral law. The just penalty for that violation is God’s holy wrath. But God provided a way to be protected from that wrath. He took His own Son and put Him on the cross. There Jesus served as a sacrifice of atonement bearing God’s wrath to the end. It was finished there. So those who put their trust in Jesus receive God’s gospel and are instantly justified – God declares them right in His sight and not guilty forever. We already know today what the verdict will be tomorrow on Judgment Day. But the verdict on your destiny can change now if you will put your trust in Christ.

- **Humbly rejoice that He has made known the riches of his glory to you.**

I cannot understand arrogance in Christians including myself. We have absolutely nothing to be arrogant about. We deserved wrath and received mercy. So we must humbly rejoice in that and live a life that responds accordingly. We’ll soon get to what that looks like in Romans 12. But isn’t it interesting that after the massive appeal to respond to God’s mercy by offering all of ourselves to him, the first specific he addresses is pride. Romans 12:3 – “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”

- **Look for God’s goodness and mercy that pursues you each day.**

You might be sitting there thinking “well God showed me mercy when I came to Christ the first time. But that mercy has dried up.” That’s not true friend. What’s the last verse in that famous 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” In other words, every day, God pursues you with His mercy.

These include things like sharing day to day life with your kids or loved ones. That's a mercy from God in this twisted world. There are millions of people who are separated from their families today because of war, famine, economies and unemployment. Last weekend, I attended the Alberta Baptist Association meetings here in Edmonton. During one session "Fresh Manna" church presented. That's a new work of immigrant Africans coming together to form a church. Before their little choir sang wonderfully and enthusiastically, a lady from that church gave her testimony.

She's from Liberia. Twenty four years ago she fled the country for her life. She had to leave behind her children a boy and a one year old girl. The boy was captured by rebels and murdered by them. The girl is now 25 with her own kids as far as I understand. This woman has not seen her daughter for 24 years. She has not seen her grand kids. Her cry and hope is that she can one day return to visit her daughter and her son's grave. I got to go home and see my son and two daughters. I get to see them every day. That's an incredible mercy from the Lord compared to what some people in this world endure. Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life.

- **Show mercy to others.** Jesus said in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy."

Where's your mercy level friend towards others? If we lack in mercy then we have likely forgotten how much mercy we've been shown by God. Those are just a few possibilities of response to God's Word.

Maybe the Holy Spirit has ministered to you in other ways.

Yes Christians and people here today. There all kinds of acts worthy of destruction by God. There is injustice. Tyrants persecute and abuse. It turns God's stomach. It rouses His holy wrath. God could end the world tomorrow. But He patiently endures for His perfect and glorious purposes. This is the depth of the riches of the wisdom of God revealed to us. This is a deeper clue to how the world really works with our Sovereign God in charge. Amen.