

Israel's Unbelief and the Character of God - Part 1

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 9:14-24
Preached on: Sunday, March 25, 2012

Will you join me this morning by taking your Bibles and turning to Paul's epistle to the Romans? We continue our study in chapter nine. This morning we will be looking at verses 14 through 24 and the first part of what will be a two part of series on Israel's unbelief and the character of God.

Let me read the text to you this morning. Romans chapter nine beginning at verse 14.

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"

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? 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? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.¹

Someone has said that God made man in his image and man returned the favor. And as you look around in our culture today you see that that is very true. We have a variety of gods that man has created. One god we might call the Santa Claus god. He is the god that exists to make us happy. He knows who has been naughty and nice and if you behave, talk to him in the right way, he will hand out the goodies. And if you preach this god you will fill stadiums.

¹ Romans 9:14-24.

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And then there is what I would call the smiley face green god. He is really made up all mankind. This is a god that winks at sin. He wants everybody to just get along and be happy. He is all about peace, social reform, saving the planet. His favorite songs are kumbya and save the whales, kill the babies. And let's all go green a drive a Chevy Volt.

And then there is the politically correct God. This God loves everybody regardless of what they believe or what they do. This is the ecumenical god who appeals to all people of faith. This is not a god of laws or of divine standards. This is a god that does not have any absolute truth. He is not a god of judgment or wrath, but he is a god of love. He is a democratic god that gives every man a vote so that we can all really make up our own rules because with this God morality is really relative and it is determined by the majority.

Now each version of god that man creates in his image is basically a god that exists to make man happy. Like a child centered home, man is the center of gravity around which this god will orbit. And one thing will always be true of a god created in man's image. Because this god, whoever he or she is, recognizes the inherent goodness in every human being, everyone goes to heaven. That is how it works.

My friend, if you have even the slightest affinity to this blasphemous distortion of God, I would submit to you that before this morning is over you will be apoplectic with rage when you discover what God has to say about himself that is so radically different than the types of things I just described. Indeed, as we look through Scripture we see that he is not a Santa Claus god, because he is a holy God that saves some and condemns others simply because he chooses to do so. He is not a smiley faced green god. He is a consuming fire. In fact Jesus said:

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”²

And when Jesus returns again, he will return in a way that will destroy this entire planet with fire. He is not a politically correct God. He is a holy God that hates both sin as well as the sinner, sinners who have violated his law and because of that the wrath of God abides upon them. And unless they believe in his only provision for reconciliation for salvation, unless a person believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, there will be no mercy, no grace, no forgiveness of sin, but only eternal condemnation. This is the God of the Bible.

Dear friend, you must understand that God does not exist for you. You exist for him. He is the creator. We are the creature. God does not grade on the curve. Nor does he grant heaven to all men, but as we see in our text before us he has mercy on whom he desires and even hardens whom he desires.

² Matthew 10:34.

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As we look at Scripture we see that although he takes no joy in condemning sinners, and though he is not willing of any to perish, he has not decreed all that he desires.

Sometimes God has decreed things that he has forbidden. As we look at Scriptures we see at times that God has decreed even his own displeasure. God willed his own displeasure when he foreordained his Son to be delivered up by his predetermined plan as we see in Acts two verse 23.

And people will ask, “Well, why didn’t God desire and therefore decree to save all men?”

And the answer is because he wanted something even greater than that. What on earth could that possibly be? The answer is he wanted to display the full range of his glorious attributes for his delight, for the delight of all those who he would draw unto himself including his attributes of his righteous wrath, his justice, his mercy, his grace and so forth. You see, God deems his own glory more important than saving everyone.

These, my friends, are some of the mysterious and glorious truths that the inspired apostle reveals here in Romans nine. And specifically this morning we will begin to examine verses 14 through 24 where Paul will deal with the issue of Israel’s unbelief and the character of God. And I pray that your heart is soft to this, that you are prepared to hear what God has to say. I pray, frankly, that you are starving for the greatness of God. I pray that you are starving to see the majesty and the excellency of Christ, because certainly we will see these things in the text before us.

Now you will recall by way of context that the Jews were absolutely convinced that because they were Abraham’s physical descendants, because they adhered to the law and all of the rabbinical traditions that, therefore, their salvation was guaranteed. And yet Jesus and the apostles come along with the gospel and make it clear that salvation is only by grace alone through faith alone and that if you refuse to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, your Messiah, you will remain under divine condemnation and you will perish in your sin.

Now, of course, the Jews insisted that this gospel message was a blasphemous distortion of the Old Testament, that because they were individual Jews and because of all Israel rejecting Jesus, therefore because of this he must have been a false Messiah. And so Paul comes along and makes a proposition saying that not all who are of Israel are heirs of God’s promise. At the end of verse six he says:

“For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.”³

In other words, just because you are a physical descendant of Abraham does not mean that you are a spiritual descendant, that not all ethnic Israelites are spiritual Israelites, that there is a spiritually elect remnant within the visible nation. And then he proved his propositions in the stories of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau as we have studied,

³ Romans 9:6.

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proving, therefore, that even Israel's unbelief is consistent with God's promises and therefore does not contradict his Word in any way. There are children of the flesh and there are children of the promise.

And from these great truths a principle emerges, one that explains really why any of us are saved. And I have summarized it in this way. The principle is simply this. In eternity past God took the initiative in salvation and solely on the basis of his uninfluenced, sovereign good pleasure he graciously chose certain ones to be saved. And those whom he chose will certainly be saved when he calls them, those and no others.

Now the Jews hear this and they say, "No fair."

Not just the Jews. Virtually everyone that hears this says, "No fair. Foul."

By the way, such a reaction is certain proof that we have interpreted the previous passages accurately as we will see. If God's election was based upon foreseen faith, as our Arminian brethren would have us believe, then Paul would have answered the question about the fairness of God's election in verse 14 by saying, "May it never be, because God is not unjust in that he elected Jacob on the basis of his faith. He looked down the corridors of time. He saw that Jacob was going to believe and so he elected him on that basis and he rejected Esau on the basis of his unbelief."

Well, obviously that is not Paul's response, because that is not the basis of election. As we look at Scripture we see that God elects those who will become the heirs of his promise without any consideration of human merit or ethnicity as in the case of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau.

Now such a doctrine also posed another huge problem for the Jews for another reason. And this has to do with Israel's belief in the character of God. The logic goes like this. And this is what Paul is going to be addressing. If God is the one who takes the initiative in salvation and he chooses some, but not all, solely on the basis of his good pleasure, then he would bring disgrace upon his character. And there are two reasons why people will raise this objection. Certainly this was what was going on with the apostle Paul and the Jews.

The first objection would be simply this. It is unfair for God to show mercy on some and not all. That is not fair. And if you say he does, then he brings disgrace upon his character. That is what we will deal with today. The issue here has to do with God's sovereign freedom to do whatever he pleases to do. Sinful man hates that kind of God. He prefers, instead a god that he can manipulate.

The second objection that we will deal with next Lord's Day, Lord willing, is this. It is unfair for God to hold a man responsible for what he has determined. So the issue here has to do with the righteousness of God, meaning in the minds of most for God to hold man responsible for what he has ordained would be unjust and therefore unrighteous.

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I find it fascinating as I study the Word of God and I am sure most of you would agree, that when we have a chance to read the Word of God and peer into the omniscient mind of God, we can see little glimpses of his glory. Now certainly we don't understand most of it. But he does give us certain things that we can understand and we behold in his omniscient mind his ability to anticipate the kinds of objections that we are dealing with here. And so like any good teacher, the Spirit of God now inspires his apostle to state these very obvious objections so that he can answer that.

So now the inspired apostle will prove that, indeed, even Israel's unbelief is consistent with God's perfect character and he will do this by illustrating God's uninfluenced sovereign choice in election.

Now notice verse 13. He has just said:

“Just as it is written, ‘JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.’”⁴

Then verse 14. Here is the objection.

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."⁵

So here Paul anticipates the first objection, that is, it is unfair for God to show mercy on some, but not all and to say that he does that would disgrace his character.

Now many with this objection will, perhaps unwittingly, torture the meaning of what is clearly stated here and in other texts to somehow make the Word of God more palatable, to make it say what they want it to say, because they would look at this and say, “My, if that is true, God is in a real jam here. We have got to bail him out.”

Some will say, for example, “Well, God is not speaking of individuals here. He is speaking of nations.” That is a very popular view, a position, by the way, that was refuted in previous expositions. Clearly he is speaking about individuals here, not of nations. He saves some individuals and not all individuals. That is the issue.

And then an even more popular position was one that was put forth many years ago by Arminius, the father of Arminianism and he would say that in this passage God is merely revealing his plan of justification by faith, not of works, that God extends his mercy to those who have responded to him in faith when he called upon them to believe in Christ, but he does not extend that mercy to those who seek to be saved by works.

⁴ Romans 9:13.

⁵ Romans 9:14-15.

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He would go on to argue that this is proven in verse 16, that God's plan is to extend mercy not to the man who will, to the man who runs, in other words, not to him who strives after it by works, but only to those who seek him in faith.

So, according to Arminius, Paul is here vindicating God's plan of salvation, namely justification by faith, not of works. Well, the problem with that is many fold, not the least of which is that Paul has already dealt at great length with the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the first five chapters of this epistle. In fact, that is the assumption upon which all of the rest of the chapters have been predicated all the way through chapter eight. This is not the focus of Romans nine.

The issue at stake here is how God saves individual people. The issue is how can God elect one person and reject another before they were ever born. It doesn't seem fair. Why does one many have faith and another does not? You see, Paul wants to explain why not all individual Israelites are spiritual descendants of Abraham. Their lost condition being the source of his overwhelming grief.

God is not dealing with the way or the method by which he shows mercy as Arminius would have us believe. He is dealing with the people to whom he shows mercy. Why is it that the causes a man to exercise saving faith? Why does anybody have faith? That is issue.

I would humbly submit that Arminius has subtly turned faith into works. And if his interpretation were correct then there would be no objection with respect to God's fairness in election. Salvation would merely be the reward of faith. God would be obligated to save such a man. So no one would object to that and we could all be happy and go home.

But that is not what the inspired apostle has been saying. He has made it abundantly clearly in verses six through 13, as I stated earlier, that in eternity past God took the initiative in salvation and solely on the basis of his uninfluenced sovereign good pleasure, he graciously chose certain ones to be saved and those whom he chose will certainly be saved when he calls them, those and no others. My friends, that is what all the fuss is about.

So be careful. Don't twist Scripture to make it lead to a conclusion that you like. Don't make the Word of God into the word of man. Let's approach Scripture with utmost humility and reverence and let God speak for himself.

Now, let's look more closely at what the Spirit of God says in verse 14.

“What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!”⁶

⁶ Romans 9:14.

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μη γενοιτο (may gin-o-to) in the original language. It is the strongest way the Greeks had to express something that is negative. This is a vehement denial, tantamount to us saying, "God forbid. Heavens, no."

You see, Paul is here defending the character of God. God is not unjust. He is by nature totally righteous in every way. In fact, his righteousness is affirmed all through Scripture.

You will recall, for example, in Genesis 18 verse 25 Abraham affirmed his righteousness by saying:

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"⁷

You see, the problem here is not God. The problem is our sense of justice which is hopelessly bias in our favor, is it not? We have finite minds. We are ignorant. Our thinking is always distorted by our fallen nature. And this is why we react to the doctrines of election and predestination with such hostility. We automatically assume that God must be unjust, that he must be unrighteous because somehow he does not meet our standard which we automatically and arrogantly assume is totally omniscient and perfectly righteous. That is how we think. But his revelation of himself, my friends, affirms that whatever he chooses to do, whether we like it or not or understand it not, is perfectly righteous.

And Psalm 119 verse 137 the psalmist says:

"Righteous art Thou, O LORD, And upright are Thy judgments."⁸

And in Psalm 119 verse 142 he says:

"Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness."⁹

The Lord spoke through Isaiah chapter 51 verse six and said:

"But My salvation shall be forever, And My righteousness shall not wane."¹⁰

And then again in verse eight.

"My righteousness shall be forever, And My salvation to all generations."¹¹

⁷ Genesis 18:25.

⁸ Psalm 119:137.

⁹ Psalm 119:142.

¹⁰ Isaiah 51:6.

¹¹ Isaiah 51:8.

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And he also spoke through his prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah chapter nine beginning in verse 23. He said:

Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth.¹²

So, to be sure, God is not unrighteous in making his eternal choices without regard to human merit or ethnicity regardless of what we might think.

Now Paul is going to cite two proofs that will demonstrate this in verses 15 and then again in verse 17 from which he will derive two conclusions in verse 16 as well as verse 18. So let's look at his first proof and here he cites Exodus 33:19. Notice verse 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.’”¹³

Now, my friends, will you first of all notice what Paul does. He goes directly to Scripture to prove his point. He does not go to human reasoning and philosophical apologetics like most people do, because we must understand only God's opinion matters, not ours. I know that is terribly offensive, but that is the truth. Often people will want to debate the matters of election and predestination. I have been in literally hundreds of them. And most of the time they approach me red faced with veins bulging and they will inevitably begin with some philosophical argument rather than an exegetical argument.

Well, I just don't believe that God would make us all robots and create some people just so he could send them to hell.

To which I would respond, “Oh, my, you are absolutely right. Scriptures do not teach that at all.”

And they look at you and they say, “Well, but isn't that what this says?”

Well, you know what? Why don't we open up the Word and see what it says? And unfortunately that typically ends the discussion.

Well, I just don't believe that sovereign election stuff.

Well, you know, most people don't. In fact, that is the reason why most people left Jesus

¹² Jeremiah 9:23-24.

¹³ Romans 9:15.

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in John 6:66. So why don't we open up the Scriptures and examine what they have to say?

So, as we come here to this text, we see that Paul goes directly and only to Scripture.

Now, what is the context of what he is saying here? And in order to understand this we would have to go back to Exodus 32. You need not turn there, but let me remind you of what was going on.

You will remember and certainly the Jews were very familiar with this text. Moses had gone up to Mount Sinai and he was receiving the two tablets of the testimony that God was giving him and while he was up there a great sin was occurring down in the valley below. The Israelites had lost confidence in Moses. He had stayed up there too long and they just didn't like the way things were going and so they became afraid and impatient there in the wilderness so they decided to, guess what? Create their own god, one that would do what they want him to do.

So they adopted the polytheistic world view of the pagan idol worshippers around them and they said to Moses' brother, Aaron the high priest in Exodus 32:

“Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”¹⁴

And so Aaron yielded to the pressure and he compromised and listened to the people rather than to God and he said, “Ok, everybody bring your jewelry here, all your gold and we will melt it down and create a god of our own liking.”

Does it sound familiar? So they made a golden calf which was the pagan symbol of virile power all in an effort to represent Yahweh. And then they worshipped it. They brought sacrifices to it and they basically had a drunken orgy in the context of their worship which was typical of the pagans in those days.

Well, naturally this apostasy absolutely infuriated God and he commanded, catch this, for some, but not all to be put to death. And about 3000 men were executed that day and if we read the Scriptures we see that about another 20,000 died of the plague.

Yet despite the outpouring of his wrath on some, God promised Moses that he would continue to faithfully love and lead his people and in chapter 33 verse 14 God told Moses:

“My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Exodus 32:1.

¹⁵ Exodus 33:13.

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And then as confirmation, Moses begged God to show him his glory and in verse 19 we read:

“I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.”¹⁶

There is the text that Paul is citing. What a beautiful statement describing the nature of God. Think about this. God’s goodness that he allowed to pass before Moses combined with the proclamation of his name literally come together and illustrate the majesty of God’s glory.

Beloved, you must understand. Fundamental to God’s glory is his propensity to show mercy to whomever he pleases, wholly apart from any stipulation outside of his will.

And we often say, “Oh, we need to live for the glory of God.”

Well, yes we do. This is what God has called us to do. And part of what that means is to exalt the nature of God which would include these divine prerogatives. It is idolatry to deny the absolute sovereignty of God to rule over his creation as he pleases. It almost sounds ridiculous when you say that. He is God. We are not. He is the Creator. We are the creature. He gets to do what he wants to do because he is God.

And then to come along and create instead some god that submits his will to the will of man, preposterous.

Daniel described God in Daniel 4:35 as the one:

“He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’”¹⁷

This hardly sounds like a God who is more concerned with man’s will than his own. Once we make the Creator subservient to the creature, to his creation by denying his sovereignty, we literally disregard God’s revelation of himself.

For example, in Isaiah 46:10 that we read earlier, we read:

“Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’”¹⁸

¹⁶ Exodus 33:19.

¹⁷ Daniel 4:35.

¹⁸ Isaiah 46:10.

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My friends, whether we like it or not, whether we believe it or not, the God of the Bible reigns supreme over all of his creation as the one who works all things after the counsel of his will.

Ephesians 1:11, again, comes as a great surprise to many people. But he is God and we are not. And we see in Paul's illustration that included in the essence of God's name are his glorious attributes, for example, his goodness, his mercy, his grace along with his sovereign freedom to dispense that goodness, that mercy and that grace on some and pour out his wrath on others.

You may not like it, but that its the nature of our glorious God.

Now, God would have been perfectly justified in killing all of those who participated in the worshipping of the golden calf. But instead what did he do? He showed mercy on some, but not all. And this is Paul's reason for using this illustration.

And what was the basis on which he spared some? One reason. Solely on the basis of his sovereign grace.

Beloved, there is on injustice there. That is Paul's point. They all deserved condemnation, yet because of the inherent goodness and grace and mercy of God some received mercy. That is what he said in Exodus 33:19.

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion."¹⁹

If I can say it a little bit differently, he is saying, in essence that when it comes to the disposal of my mercy and my grace, I am going to do what I am going to do without any stipulations, without any influences other than my own good pleasure. And I am going to do this to accomplish my purpose which is ultimately to glorify myself and whatever I do is perfectly just and eternally righteous.

Nowhere does Paul even give a hint that the cause of his elective choice is in anything other than in his own person. And this explains his next statement and this is the conclusion that Paul draws from this illustration of his elective mercy cited in verse 15.

Notice verse 16. He says:

"So then it does not depend on the man who wills."²⁰

Literally the one willing, referring to man's inner desire. It does not depend on that.

¹⁹ Exodus 33:19.

²⁰ Romans 9:16.

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“...or the man who runs...”²¹

Again, literally, the man running, speaking of man’s human effort. It doesn’t depend on man’s desires or his effort. What does it depend upon?

“...but on God who has mercy.”²²

Beloved, please hear me. Don’t accuse God of being unjust because he shows mercy on some and passes over others. Believe me, you don’t want justice. You want mercy. If God dealt with all of us on the basis of justice we would all be damned. Don’t you understand?

Martin Lloyd-Jones had it right when he said, and I quote, “Nobody has any claim upon God’s mercy. The fact that anybody has ever received mercy is entirely because of the character and the nature of God. The real mercy is not that everybody is not saved, but that anybody is saved. That is the mystery.” He goes on to say, “Do not try to understand the mind of the eternal God. You cannot. Recognize what he says, what he does. Recognize his right to do so. And if you have ever received mercy you will be filled with this sense of wonder and amazement that he has been able to have mercy on anybody above all on you.” And then he goes on to say this. “And when you consider the way he contrived in order to show this mercy and to make it actual and practical even in delivering his only begotten Son up to the death of the cross on Calvary’s hill, your amazement and astonishment will be so great that far from asking questions about unrighteousness and injustice, you will humble yourself before him lost in wonder, love and praise,” end quote.

Well next will you notice that in verse 17 Paul offers a second proof to demonstrate that God is not unjust or unrighteous in making his eternal choices without regard to human merit or ethnicity. And this is followed by another conclusion in verse 18.

Here Paul is going to cite another passage from Exodus that the Jews would have been familiar with, Exodus chapter nine verse 16. Notice verse 17 of Romans nine.

“For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.’”²³

Now think about this. This is so fascinating. Here you have a vile, evil, arrogant idolater, pharaoh, probably Amenhotep II. And he has no idea that his sovereign creator has raised him up to be the uncontested monarch of the world in Egypt at that particular time in history so that he could be a part of God’s plan to ultimately glorify himself.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Romans 9:17.

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Verse 17, again, God had a purpose.

“TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.”²⁴

But now the key to understanding where the inspired apostle is going here in this illustration is found in the conclusion that he makes in the next verses. Notice verse 18.

“So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”²⁵

The term “harden” translates the Greek word σκληρυνω (sklay-roo’-no) and it means to cause to be stubborn or obstinate, especially with regard to the truth.

You know the story. You have got two groups of sinners here, like Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau illustrated earlier. You have got the Jews and you have got the Egyptians, the Gentiles. But God shows mercy on Israel by delivering them from the bondage of pharaoh and yet what does he do with pharaoh? He passes over him with that mercy and he hardens the heart of pharaoh in order that God might multiply his miraculous signs in the land of Egypt and extend that season of divine glory so that the whole world might exalt and proclaim the name of the Lord. That is what Exodus seven verse three tells us.

But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh will not listen to you, then I will lay My hand on Egypt, and bring out My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by great judgments. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst.²⁶

Indeed, the miraculous signs and wonders that the Lord performed when he delivered his covenant people from that bondage were glorious beyond words. In fact, the plagues that he brought upon pharaoh and the Egyptians were literally intended to make a mockery of their Egyptian deities. And had God not hardened the heart of pharaoh he might have caved in early. And had he done that, that would have limited that period of time that God wanted to really make his statement.

And, of course, the capstone of it all was when God parted the Red Sea and led his people across that great corridor, brought them to the other side and then caused the waters to collapse upon the Egyptian charioteers and bury them in a watery grave. My, my, my, my

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Romans 9:18.

²⁶ Exodus 7:3-5.

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friend, what a contrast between divine mercy on some and wrath upon others, once again illustrating what Paul cited in verse 13.

“JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.”²⁷

Verse 15.

“I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.”²⁸

And then here in verse 18.

“So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”²⁹

And just as God had promised, the Egyptians and all of the world learned that Yahweh was, indeed the Lord. In fact, as you read the text, you will see that the entire world of that day became absolutely terrified as they thought of the one true God of Israel after the crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of pharaoh's forces. You will remember that Moses and the sons of Israel sang a song to the Lord. It is recorded in Exodus 15. And it is a song that exalts God's mercy on them and his wrath upon their enemies. And at the end of that song they proclaimed exactly what Paul cited in verse 17 from Exodus 9:16. And that is that God demonstrated his power through pharaoh and had his name proclaimed throughout the whole earth. Here is what the song says in Exodus 15 beginning at verse 14.

They sang this:

The peoples have heard, they tremble; Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia. Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them; All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.³⁰

Once again, my friends, we are confronted with the reality that God has a purpose in all that he does and he has a plan to accomplish it. And he does this through his uninfluenced sovereign choices.

It is fascinating that God predicted that he would harden pharaoh's heart in Exodus 4:21. There we read:

²⁷ Romans 9:13.

²⁸ Romans 9:15.

²⁹ Romans 9:18.

³⁰ Exodus 15:14-15.

Israel's Unbelief and the Character of God - Part 1

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 9:14-24

Preached on: Sunday, March 25, 2012

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.’”³¹

And it is interesting. In the Exodus account of God’s dealing with pharaoh through his servant Moses, there are 10 passages that speak of how God hardened pharaoh’s heart, this wicked monarch that he had raised up for his own purposes. But what is amazing also is that God said that pharaoh also hardened his own heart. Isn’t that interesting? Exodus 8:32 and 9:34.

And here, again, beloved, we are confronted with this inscrutable mystery of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, a tension that exists all through Scripture that is beyond our ability to reconcile.

Now, I would also add that it is important to point out that Paul’s reference to hardening does not pertain to salvation or man’s eternal destiny, but rather to man’s role in God’s sovereign plan in redemptive history to bring glory to himself.

You must remember, man is a sinner by nature. He does not need God to harden his heart in order to condemn it. Man is condemned already. He needs mercy. He needs grace.

So Paul’s point in this illustration of pharaoh is to prove, once again, that there is no injustice. There is no unrighteousness in God when he chooses to show mercy on some and harden the hearts of others. He is, again, illustrating that it is God’s prerogative to elect those whom he will. His elective purposes are totally unconditional. No one deserves mercy and so no one can demand it. And for this reason, my friends, Paul is saying that Israel’s unbelief in no way disgraces the character of God, because, again, God is a God that is filled with compassion and he saves some on that basis.

All men are unworthy. There is nothing, therefore, unjust that God shows mercy to some, but not to all. And because God is perfectly righteous, nothing he does is unrighteous and because he is the sovereign Creator, he is free to do whatever he pleases to do.

Dear friends, this is what God says of himself. Again, obviously God’s purposes and plans are infinitely beyond our comprehension. These things he has revealed to us and we must accept them in humility by faith.

And I might add in closing if God were not sovereign, free to do as he pleases, we would all be without hope. Do you realize that? Our lives would be like a rudderless ship that is hopelessly adrift in a violent sea of random chaos. But, my friends, because God is sovereign we can relax. We can rejoice knowing that all things work together for good to them that love God.

³¹ Exodus 4:21.

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So I challenge you this morning to compare your definition of God with his definition of himself. Where it disagrees, I would ask you to repent and to believe. And where it agrees, I would ask you to rejoice and believe even more. And your heart will resonate the words of the hymnist in the Psalter of 1912 taken from Psalm 115 that said this.

Not unto us, oh Lord heaven, but unto thee be glory given.
In love and truth thou dost fulfill the counsels of thy sovereign will.
Though nations fail, thy power to own,
Yet thou dost reign and thou alone.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for these glorious truths that give us such comfort. Granted, we do not understand them. As you are going to go on to say we are the clay. How could we possibly fuss about how the potter has made us? Lord, the disparity is mindboggling. So we thank you that you are a glorious, a holy, a loving, a merciful, good God and we rejoice knowing that your sovereign purposes cannot be thwarted and in this we relax. And, Lord, finally, once again, I would pray for those who hear these words and find them to be confusing or perhaps even repulsive, I pray, Spirit of God, that you will soften their hearts to the truth that they are sinners in need of your grace, that they would believe in you that they might understand. So we commit that to you to the praise of your glory in Jesus' name. Amen.

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