

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel

Part forty-nine - Sunday, June 22nd, 2014, 10:00 a.m.

Teaching #1736 - Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND THE ROOTS OF UNBELIEF - WHOSE FAULT IS IT WHEN PEOPLE DON'T BELIEVE?

John 12:37-41 - "Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, [38] so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" [39] Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, [40] "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." [41] Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him."

Sometimes the sovereignty of God is a doctrine used to cancel out human responsibility. It's almost as though we think God is pleased when His precious sovereignty over His creation is used to promote a kind of "Que sera, sera - Whatever will be, will be" attitude. That's the issues staring us in the face in today's text.

Verses 37 and 38 are the Apostle John's words. Jesus' words wrap up in **verse 36** and then pick up again in **verse 44**. John, and the rest of the disciples, must have wrestled long and hard with the mathematics of Jesus' mission. At least statistically, the numbers didn't measure up to a success. This is what prompts John to harken back to *Isaiah's* words in **Isaiah 53:1** - "Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?"

Those words might sound poetic to us, but for the prophet who first spoke them and to John who quotes them they represent a frustrating sense of dismal failure - "*Just who has believed what he has heard from us?*" In other words, "*Is anybody really listening to our message? Are we accomplishing anything at all?*"

When Isaiah first spoke those words he was called to deliver a message of God's imminent judgment on the nation of Judah. They were being turned over to destruction for their hard-hearted, stubborn rejection of God's care and God's word. And here's the thing. God **told** Isaiah that even though it is his **assignment** to warn the people, they are not going to listen to a thing he says. In fact, God already **told** Isaiah the more he calls the people to **repent**, the more stubborn and wicked they will become. Their **unbelief** - "*....who has believed what he heard?*" - was a **predicted** unbelief. They would reject God's strong delivering, restoring arm.

You can see why John is drawn to Isaiah's words. The parallels with Isaiah are too obvious to miss. Like the prophet, Jesus too had already **predicted** His "**narrow gate**" would only be found by a "**few**" - **Matthew 7:14** - "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and **those who find it are few.**"

"**Few.**" These numbers are hard to square with the length and breadth of God's love and mercy. Jesus came because, John records, Father God "**so loved the world.**" So what has gone so wrong? You can see how this issue raises its head as John continues to expound the nature of **belief** and **unbelief**.

1) **DID GOD PREDICT THEIR UNBELIEF OR DID HE CAUSE IT?**

John 12:37-41 - "Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, [38] so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" [39] Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, [40] "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." [41] Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him."

This is one of the most quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament. It is quoted to various degrees **five times**. The central theme of God's just hardening of stubborn hearts in unbelief is profoundly difficult to come to terms with, as is evidenced by the division of the church over its meaning. How shall we put together the two themes of these unbelievers being **responsible** for their unbelief and the clearly stated fact that **God Himself** was hardening their hearts against Him?

Is God the sole cause of their blindness? Not according to *Calvin's* mentor, *Augustine* - "*But some mutter, and ask, 'What fault was it of the Jews, if it was necessary that the sayings of Isaiah should be fulfilled?' We answer, that God, foreseeing the future, predicted by the prophet the unbelief of the Jews, but did not cause it. God does not compel men to sin because He knows they will sin.... The Jews committed the sin, which He who knows all things foretold they would commit.*"

I would agree with those ancient remarks. But the question still remains, ***“What did Isaiah mean - and the Apostle John in quoting Isaiah’s words - that God had ‘blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts’(40)?”*** We can’t just pretend those words aren’t in the inspired text.

Here’s what I do when faced with deeply challenging words like these. I look for similar situations in the rest of Scripture. Are there other passages that deal with the same issue? Are there keys to seeing how Scripture can interpret Scripture? This is usually not *easy* to do, but is *deeply rewarding* when the effort is made.

I think there are other places in the Bible where God is said to **harden** human hearts and **blind** human eyes. Perhaps the most well-known example is the hardening of **Pharaoh’s** heart:

The study of Pharaoh’s heart usually has its start in **Romans 9:15-18** - ***“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.”***

God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Everyone knows that. But there’s also a great deal that simply gets **assumed** as to how this took place in Pharaoh’s heart. It’s not quite as clearly stated as many believe. Let’s quickly breeze through a string of texts that talk about Pharaoh and his hardened heart:

Exodus 4:21 - ***“And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.”***

Here God **predicts** something He will do to Pharaoh in the future. As far as we know, He hasn’t done this to Pharaoh’s heart yet. This is a prediction. But it says nothing whatsoever about **how** Pharaoh’s heart will become hardened.

Exodus 8:15 - ***“But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”***

Here we are told Pharaoh refused to listen to the warnings of God’s judgment. God spoke. Pharaoh rejected God’s words. And the text says Pharaoh **hardened his own heart in the process**.

Exodus 8:32 - ***“But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.”***

Again, God spoke, warned, and acted in judgment. And Pharaoh **almost** listened, but refused. And the text again says Pharaoh **hardened his own heart in the process**.

Exodus 9:12 - ***“But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses.”***

This is more than a prediction. This is **God hardening Pharaoh’s heart**. God is the one working on the leader’s heart. He is removing any future possibility for Pharaoh to see the light and come to his senses.

Exodus 9:34 - ***“But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants.”***

Now Pharaoh is the active one in hardening his heart. God isn’t mentioned, though Pharaoh’s self-destructive action isn’t a surprise considering God has already been active in closing his heart to the truth.

Exodus 10:20 - ***“But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.”***

This is coming to the end of the road for Pharaoh. God is closing the leader’s eyes. He can’t find it in his heart to turn anything around. This is clearly the judgment of God on Pharaoh.

So where does this leave us? Is Pharaoh’s doom the work of Pharaoh, or God, or both? And I think the answer must be **both**. Remember, Pharaoh doesn’t start out neutral with God. Long before there’s any mention whatsoever about God hardening Pharaoh’s heart Pharaoh is already holding God’s people captive and treating them with cruelty. This is the scene into which God’s hardening words are birthed. Pharaoh is already **against** God in heart.

Then consider the way the rest of the inspired Old Testament Scriptures explain the state of Pharaoh's heart. And look at where they place the blame:

1 Samuel 6:1-6 - "The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. [2] And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." [3] They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you." [4] And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. [5] So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. [6] Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed?"

The Philistines are desperate to make peace with a God they really don't know. The Ark of the Lord has turned out to be more of a curse to them than a blessing. But they know they must do something. They don't want to end up like **Pharaoh** and the **Egyptians**, under the severe wrath of God. Notice, God judged **Pharaoh** and the **Egyptians** after they hardened their hearts in disobedience.

But what these Philistines are missing is also important. What they're missing is the way in which God **actually hardened those wicked Egyptian hearts as part of His judgment against their already stubborn unbelief.**

So yes, Pharaoh hardened his own heart. And yes, God **deepened** Pharaoh's blindness as a part of His judgment on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. God accelerated and guaranteed Pharaoh's blindness.

This probably shouldn't surprise us. We've already encountered the very same theology in the explicit teaching of Jesus to the stubborn Pharisees in **John 9:39-41** - "Jesus said, 'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.' [40] Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, 'Are we also blind?' [41] Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.'"

You can see this process repeated again later in Judah's history in **Zechariah 7:8-13** - "And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying, [9] "Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, [10] do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart." [11] But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. [12] They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts. [13] 'As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,' says the LORD of hosts...."

This is history repeating itself. First, says the text, God called to His stubborn people. They would not hear (13). This is how they "made their hearts diamond-hard"(12). Then, in judgment, God **shut the door and refused to even consider them anymore** (13). As in the case of Pharaoh, both parties are involved. God deepens the blindness of hearts that refuse to see.

Can this actually be the process? Do we have any other clues from the Scriptures that such is the case? We do:

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 - "The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, [10] and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. [11] Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, [12] in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

This is the same principle repeated again for our learning. Paul's words are painfully clear. It is unavoidable that **God** is the One sending the blindness upon these people. This is the exact equivalent to the divine **hardening of the heart**. God actually **causes** these people to **"believe what is false"**(11).

But why? Did God just choose to be arbitrarily cruel to these people? No. That's not it. These are people who **on their own** made the decision to **"refuse to love the truth and so be saved"**(10). This is the exact repetition, with slightly more explanation of the process, of God's hardening work in Pharaoh and, more to our point, the **Apostle John's** explanation of the unbelief of these stubborn hearts in the closing verses of **John chapter 12**.

2) PEOPLE CAN BE SAVED THROUGH THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH AND PEOPLE CAN BE DAMNED THROUGH IT AS WELL

It's always a **weighty thing** to come before God. That doesn't mean it isn't **joyful**. It simply means God takes our joy in Himself very seriously. He has designed us such that we can never trifle with Him. He is best taken very seriously or totally ignored. Our convictions about our Lord must be held very **actively**. They poison our system when we leave them stagnant like good food that's gone bad in the fridge.

Strangely enough, as we've been considering Pharaoh, he's a good example of this. His heart is hardened as he **fails to listen to God quickly**. Eventually, he lets the people go. But he loses his heart as he puts off what he knows God is telling Him to do. He doesn't **deny God's existence**. He simply takes charge of his own decisions as though God didn't have the right to tell him what to do.

That's what the Apostle John sees in the religious crowd of unbelievers around Jesus. John is reminding us all **unbelief is hard to admit**. Our religious routines can easily make us assume active belief in Jesus even when our daily actions deny His Lordship. The call today is to **fight unbelief like you would fight an intruder in your house at night**.

This takes incredible honesty. Most of us can only summon ourselves to admit spiritual deadness in it's earliest manifestations. It must be faced in the very first **hesitations to obey**. Closet hesitation to honor Christ only thickens over time. Today's text tells us our Lord - though incredibly patient and loving - won't tolerate fakers who pretend a faith deeper than they actually live out. Don't put your life under that kind of divine judgment.