

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part twenty-four
Sunday, April 14th, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2124
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THE MOST DIFFICULT CHAPTER IN THE BIBLE - AND WHY WE NEED TO STUDY IT (Part 2)

Romans 9:14-18 - "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. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

Very quickly, here's what we should know about this chapter from last week's teaching. **First, there are two big ideas in the opening 13 verses - Israel and election - and each is used in two different ways.** There is **Israel** as it is used to refer to **all ethnic Jews**. It is to this group that God gave very specific blessings. Those blessings are listed in **verses 1-5**. Then there is a group **within** Israel, those who place their faith and pledge their ongoing commitment to God and His promise - **verses 7-9**.

Second, God's "purpose in election"(11) was to show His blessing would rest on faith in His free promise rather than human effort or ethnic identity and birth order (9-13). The Jewish tendency to box God into honoring them just because they were Abraham's descendants could never stand before God.

Third, God's free decision to extend His covenant of faith through Isaac rather than Ishmael, and Jacob rather than Esau, didn't exclude either Ishmael and his descendants nor Esau and his descendants from entering the blessing and favor of God. In other words, in choosing to extend His covenant of mercy along certain lines rather than others God **wasn't** eternally saving some individuals and damning others. We **know** this because not all of **Jacob's** descendants remained **faithful** and not all of **Esau's** descendants were **unfaithful**. Unacceptable as it was to the Jewish nation, even in Jesus' day, God was sovereign to extend His grace wherever He found a faith-filled heart.

This is so important. Romans chapter nine, in my opinion, is all about the **way** in which God's covenant would flow and the **terms** on which it would be received. It is **not** about who would respond and who would not.

Now on to today's text:

"What shall we say then," are words meant to set up an imagined argument to what Paul has been teaching. The **Jewish argument** was that God was committed to a **genealogical approach** to salvation. The Jews were God's people by virtue of being **born** descendants of Abraham. There is **nothing** God could ever do but save them all. In fact, Paul has already dealt with the Jewish position in **Romans 9:6a** - **"But it is not as though the word of God has failed....."**

The reason Paul had to **say** that was, to the Jewish mind, the only way a Jew **could** ever be lost would be if God went back on His word. So completely had Judaism boxed God into an **ethnic redemption** that He was not sovereign or free in the extension of His mercy on anything other than Jewish terms.

Paul then went on to explain from the examples of Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and Esau that God's covenant of grace didn't advance along lines of ethnicity or birth order. God's saving mercy couldn't be **locked into** any religious system. Isaac's birth to barren Sarah and aged Abraham was proof that God's covenant advanced not along the lines of **human accomplishment** but along the lines of **bare faith** in **divine promise** plus nothing else - **"This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring"**(Romans 9:8).

These words are devastating to Judaism. God worked through faith in divine promise plus nothing else. And that concept would never stand unchallenged by those trusting in ethnic Judaism. And it is to their obvious arguments that Paul gives voice in today's text.

1) **WHEN GOD RESPONDS IN MERCY TO NOTHING BUT FAITH HE IS NOT BREAKING HIS WORD TO ABRAHAM**

Romans 9:14-16 - "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."

The lead question is clearly stated - **"Is there injustice on God's part?"**(15). The important point here is Paul isn't

introducing a **brand new issue** in these verses. When he mentions an **“injustice”** committed by God Paul is going back to the same issue he raised in **verse 6** - **“But it is not as though the word of God has failed....”** God’s word failing and an injustice on God’s part are the same thing. If God’s word failed then God is a liar.

This is the Jewish hot spot. In the Jewish mind, if God is going to justify on any other basis than Jewish ethnicity, then God is an unjust covenant breaker. He’s going back on the promise He made through Abraham in the Old Testament. If God justifies **anyone** by sheer faith in His saving mercy, **or** if He condemns any Jew - any descendant of Abraham with whom He made covenant, then **yes**, to the Jewish mind, there is injustice on God’s part.

Paul continues: **“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”(9:15-16).**

It is significant Paul sites these words - given to **Moses**, nonetheless - to refute any notion of **Jewish limited redemption**. So right from their own Scriptures - from their own **primary leader** - Paul pulls this open-ended statement about God’s **freedom** in revealing His mercy.

And please notice something else. These verses are dealing specifically and **exclusively** with the subject of God’s mercy. Paul will deal with God’s wrath later on. But **these** verses do not **mention** wrath. The subject here is exclusively that of **mercy** - **“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.”**

Also, note carefully the way verse 15 sets up the meaning of verse 16. Here, and I say it with respect, I think **R.C. Sproul** is dead wrong about this verse. It is not a linch-pin for Calvinism. The **“it”** in **verse 16** - **“So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy”** - sets the interpretation of these two verses taken together. The **“it”** in verse 16 refers specifically to the **revelation of God’s mercy, and nothing but God’s mercy**.

The **“it”** in **verse 16** ties directly back to the subject of **verse 15**. And simple honesty with the text requires the admission that there simply is no other subject listed in verse 15 other than divine mercy and compassion. Paul is answering the Jewish objection to grace being restricted to the boundaries of Jewish religion. And Paul says, **“No! IT (God’s mercy) doesn’t come along the lines of human work or merit. God is sovereignly free. He can give out His mercy on any terms He chooses to whomever He chooses.”**

2) GOD IS SO COMMITTED TO REVEALING HIS MERCY THAT HE WILL EITHER REVEAL IT TO WILLING PEOPLE OR THROUGH UNWILLING PEOPLE

Romans 9:17-18 - **“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 does **two** things with Pharaoh in these verses. First, He **“raises him up”**(17), and, second, He **“hardens”** his heart (18). And finally, these verses tell us **why** God does both these things to Pharaoh - **“....that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth”**(17). Let’s study the two things God **does** to Pharaoh in reverse order.

First, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart. This can’t be explained away. And it doesn’t **need** to be explained away. It is a simple description of something God does **repeatedly** through both the Old and New Testaments, and will continue to do until Jesus comes again.

The **way** God hardens Pharaoh’s heart is a fascinating study. Pharaoh comes on the scene shaking his fist in God’s face - **Exodus 5:1-2** - **“Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’ [2] But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.’”**

This is Pharaoh right out of the gate. This is Pharaoh in **his own** disposition, **before** there is any mention of God hardening his heart. God **predicts** He will harden Pharaoh’s heart twice before He actually does it (**Exodus 4:21** and **7:3**). Then God actually **hardens** Pharaoh’s heart in **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.”** But **before** God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, Pharaoh reveals his own stubbornness in the face of Moses’ warnings:

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."

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

It seems to me this is vitally important to remember. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart *isn't* God *urging* him to do evil. This is important because, while it's *one* thing to fold arms and say "Who are you to question God," it is quite *another* to deliberately forsake what we *know* God Himself has revealed about His own character - **James 1:13** - "Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." We need to bow reverently before God when He states, in no uncertain terms, "*I don't prompt people toward evil. Not now. Not ever! Remember that about Me.*"

But our Romans text still says God *hardened* Pharaoh's heart. And I believe He did, in the way He repeatedly hardens people's hearts in their own willful rebellion against Him.

Consider Paul's previous teaching on this very point in **Romans 1:22-24, 26, and 28** - "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. [24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves....26....For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature....28....And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done."

Behold God hardening hearts. But this is *not* God *causing* the initial rebellion. This is God justly *fixing* hearts in the direction of their choice. And this is *exactly* the way Jesus Himself described the hardening work of God in the hearts of many of the Pharisees and Scribes of His day:

Matthew 13:12-15 - "For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. [13] This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. [14] Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: 'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. [15] For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'"

And Paul makes it quite clear that this same hardening work will manifest itself down through the church age, with particular intensity as we near the return of Jesus Christ - **2 Thessalonians 2:8-12** - "And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. [9] 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."

So yes, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. But so did Pharaoh. And Pharaoh did it first. This is how God always hardens all stubborn hearts. I said earlier that God did *two* things to Pharaoh. He *hardened Pharaoh's heart*, as we've already studied. Then our text says God *raised Pharaoh up* - "For this very purpose I have raised you up...."(17). This aspect has nothing to do with Pharaoh's *character*. It has to do with his *providential position* in God's historic plan.

God placed Pharaoh in a place of *high visibility - high recognition*. He put Pharaoh in a place in Egypt such that what God was *doing* with Pharaoh would be *noticed by the world*. This ties in with the *third aspect* of these verses - the *reason* God hardened Pharaoh's heart and the *reason* he raised Pharaoh up - "....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*"(Romans 9:17).

This is *why* God *raised Pharaoh up*. If Pharaoh had been born in a cabin in the woods, he may well have still been stubborn and obstinate and rebellious against God. But it would all have had little historical consequence.

So why did God *raise Pharaoh up* and why did God *harden Pharaoh's heart*? Because if God *didn't* do that, we

would never have seen the power of God in the plagues or the Passover blood on the houses or the drowning of Pharaoh's army. And God's name wouldn't have been proclaimed in all the earth.

But it **was** proclaimed because God raised Pharaoh up and hardened his heart:

Exodus 15:14-15 - "The peoples have heard; they tremble; pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. [15] Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away." These are the words Israel sang as they celebrated God's miraculous deliverance through the crossing of the Red Sea. The nations **heard** of the name of the LORD.

Or look at the words of Rahab, to whom God would reveal his delivering grace and mercy - **Joshua 2:9-10** - "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. [10] For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction."

Or look at the words of the Gibeonites to Joshua as they sought Israel's favor - **Joshua 9:9** - "They said to him, "From a very distant country your servants have come, because of the name of the Lord your God. For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt..."

All of these verses, and many more besides, reveal the success of God's plan to have His "**name proclaimed in all the earth**" (**Romans 9:17**). And **why** did God want His name proclaimed in all the earth? It was to reveal His mercy and compassion to all who might believe. Or in the words of **Romans 9:15** - "....I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

This was God's plan in both **hardening Pharaoh's heart** and **raising him up** in Egypt. He would manifest His mercy on a wider scale than would have happened without Pharaoh. And **why** is this so important? Because, as we'll see in future weeks, Paul uses the account of Pharaoh as a perfect picture of what God was doing in Israel.

Some of Israel became **hardened against God's plan**. Did that mean God's plan had failed (as Paul considered in **9:6**)? No, not at all. Rather God was going to do exactly what He previewed with Pharaoh. He would gather in the Gentiles through the hardness of Israel's heart. More on that next week.