

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ELECTION (PART III)

As stated in our last message, we noted the importance of grasping the Biblical teaching on *sin, grace* and the *holiness of God* if we are ever going to really appreciate the doctrine of election. How are we to understand this critically important Biblical truth? “Whether we mean to or not, and whether we like it or not, all of us read the text as interpreted by our theological presuppositions.”¹ The language we use to understand ourselves and our world is not simply a matter of words. It is the result of the interactions of many other factors: how we understand the world; the particular social pressures to which we are subject; patterns of behavior into which we have settled; how our collective life is shaped politically; how our most deeply felt anxieties and perplexities are understood; how we conceive of our gender and ethnic differences; how we relate to our things, to the past, to ourselves, and most fundamentally, to God. In this sense, our everyday language is the outcome of our engagement with life at very deep complex, and sometimes painful levels.²

First and foremost, it is no exaggeration to say that interpretation is all about language. If we don't know the meaning of the words, we will never know the meaning of the text, and a term like *election* is just one of many examples. The problem that we must constantly confront is the tendency to read *into* the meaning of the scriptural terms a meaning that is quite foreign to what the biblical writer intended. This happens all the time, but it is becoming more and more common in our therapeutic culture where the vocabulary of psychology has replaced what was handed down to us by our evangelical forbears. We have to constantly guard against our own proclivity to adopt the habits and mental conventions of our therapeutic culture (cf. Romans 12:1, 2). *Sin*, for example, in the minds of many who fill our pews on any given Sunday, has either totally disappeared from our vocabulary or its meaning has undergone a profound change. Biblically, sin has always had a theological and moral definition. Today it is primarily understood psychologically, not so much with sin in relation to God, but with sin in relation to ourselves.

David F. Wells has recently written that this distinctively non-biblical notion of sin “begins with our anxiety, pain, and disillusionment, with the world in its disorder, the family or marriage in its brokenness, or the workplace in its brutality and insecurity. God, in consequence, is valued to the extent that he is able to bathe these wounds, assuage these insecurities, calm these fears, restore some sense of internal order, and bring some sense of wholeness.”³

My late professor of theology, S. Lewis Johnson, correctly noted that, “It is doubtful that there is a more difficult passage in the Epistle to the Romans than the one to which we now come in our studies in this great epistle. While the apostle has said a great deal about the doctrine of election, he has said little about the doctrine of reprobation. That subject, however, comes before us in this section, for here Paul speaks of individuals who are hardened by God in His sovereign will. He writes, ‘Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth’ (v. 18). It is not an easy concept for the 20th century. Paul has been pointing out in the preceding context that the failure of the present generation of Israel, due to their rejection of their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, is not an unexpected and unexampled thing. Throughout the history of Israel there has been in operation the principle of distinguishing grace. Among the sons of Abraham, Ishmael was rejected and Isaac chosen, for the Scripture says, ‘In Isaac shall thy seed be called’ (cf. Gen. 21:12). And among the sons of Isaac a choice was made, for ‘Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated’ (cf. Mal. 1:2; Rom. 9:13). Thus, Israel should not be surprised to find only a remnant of believers from the nation embracing their Messiah. It is not easy for men to understand and appreciate the fact that God operates in sovereign and distinguishing grace in His dealings with them. And what complicates the matter is the fact that the minds of men have been affected by the sin of Adam, and they are unable to understand the Word of God. Further, even Christians must have their minds renewed by the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit to comprehend and appreciate the ways in which God works in the accomplishment of His purposes. In our present state of limited and warped knowledge of God, due to the effects of sin as a result of

the fall of man, it is important to remember that we are like children in the things of God. He is our Father, and we are not yet ready for all of the truth of God that we may ultimately know.⁴

Before examining the passage in Romans 9:14-18, let us look back to the account in Exodus that the Apostle has in mind. Here we see two men – Moses and Pharaoh – each with his own perspective. One is God-centered, the other is self-centered. Norman Geisler is typical of many who attempt to avoid the clear force of “God hardening Pharaoh’s heart” by declaring, “Even the strong passages on God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart follow only after Pharaoh first repeatedly hardened his own heart (Exod. 7:13-14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32) (p. 65).” He does not seem to have noticed that Exod. 4:21 and 7:3 (which precede the texts he has cited) prophetically declare that God’s action preceded Pharaoh’s.⁵

I. THE PROGRESS OF PHARAOH’S CONDITION

(1) His heart was hard, (2) he hardened his heart, (3) the Lord hardened his heart. We often fail to realize the spiritual condition of the natural man in our efforts in evangelism, “men prefer darkness to light” (John 3:19). Why is this? What do the Scriptures mean by expressions like “HARDNESS OF HEART” – it can be TOTAL AND ABSOLUTE or PARTIAL AND COMPARATIVE only. There is NATURAL HARDNESS, THE RESULT OF THE HEART IN SIN BY NATURE (Rom. 2:5). This is the heart God changes in conversion (Ezek. 36:26). There is JUDICIARY hardness, either directly from God, or indirectly thru Satan by God’s permission (II Cor. 4:4).

(1) PHARAOH’S CONDITION AS A NATURAL STATE

- A. He is ignorant of the LORD and refuses to hear (5:2).
- B. When confronted with the sign of Aaron’s rod (7:13, 14), Pharaoh has his “experts” on hand and is unimpressed.
- C. The FIRST plague – Nile to blood – same result (7:22).
- D. The SECOND plague – frogs – Pharaoh’s “experts” on the spot – but a different response on Pharaoh’s part (8:8).

People do go through the motions, they do indeed make decisions – but they are still operating from the same PERSPECTIVE – nothing has changed in this regard. People do have “foxhole” conversions – only to repent later of their repentance!

(2) PHARAOH’S CONDITION BY CHOICE

- A. With the frogs gone, “Pharaoh hardened his heart” (8:15). After the difficulties pass we act not only by nature, but also by CHOICE.
- B. The THIRD plague – lice – the “experts” are troubled – but Pharaoh? (8:19). We act in ways that are obviously wrong, but we still go our own way.
- C. The FOURTH plague – flies – (only on Egypt, NOT Israel – v. 23) Pharaoh seeks a compromise – but reneges (v. 32).
- D. The FIFTH plague – cattle die (Egypt, NOT Israel) – and Pharaoh persisted (9:7). The first four plagues were unpleasant inconveniences – but beginning with the fifth plague, things begin to get serious, mounting in severity.
- E. The SIXTH plague – boils – Pharaoh’s “experts” could not stand before Moses (9:11).

(3) PHARAOH’S CONDITION DETERMINED BY THE LORD

- A. After the boils – God actively hardened Pharaoh’s heart (9:12).
- B. Pharaoh confronted by the Word of God (9:13-17ff)
- C. Pharaoh’s response to the Word of God and the SEVENTH plague – hail (9:34-35) – The active work of God in hardening Pharaoh’s heart meant that Pharaoh’s only response would be further hardening and that by his own choice – when God gives men over to their own wishes, they add sin to sin (Rom. 1:26).
- D. The EIGHTH plague – locust – why do the plagues continue? (10:10). – God not only hardened Pharaoh’s heart, but also the heart of his servants – why? “That ... (v. 1, 2).
- E. Pharaoh seeks ANOTHER compromise – (NOTE his counsellors words in v. 7).
- F. Pharaoh acknowledges his sin – but does not repent! Why? – “The LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” (10:20)
- G. The NINTH plague – darkness – Pharaoh seeks more compromise (v. 24).

H. “But the LORD HARDENED PHARAOH’S HEART” – (10:27)

II. GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSES – Exod. 4:21)

(1) THE LORD GOD WILL BE HONORED.

A. Pharaoh will be clay in the Potter’s hand – God declares this (14:4).

B. Pharaoh and his servants “turn their hearts against Israel” (v. 5). Why? “The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (v. 8).

C. It was the determinative purpose of God to destroy Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea – (14:17).

CONCLUSION: God can and does determine the actions of men (Prov. 21:1). Oh! You say, but I have a free-will? Indeed you do. God has given us freedom – even to disobey Him – but NOT freedom to thwart Him or to defeat His purpose – and God can always take away. God can take away your sanity (Dan. 4:34-36). The very breath you now take, He can take away (Dan. 5:23). Our wills are only free when we are in agreement with God – “freedom” to sin is bondage. (John 8:34).

I close with this observation from the Puritan great, Thomas Manton: “This contest on Pharaoh’s part is managed with slights and contempt of God; on God’s part, with mercy and condescension. On Pharaoh’s part with slights and contempt of God: Exod. V. 2, ‘And Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go.’ Words of profane contempt. ‘Who is the Lord?’ as if he should say, Am not I king of Egypt? Who is my peer, much less my superior and my lord? ‘I know not the Lord.’ Ere God hath done with Pharaoh he shall know him to the purpose. Mark the words, ‘I know not;’ and then, ‘I will not.’ Hardness is the usual effect of blindness. Errors of mind go on to errors of heart. I will not know, I will not hear of it; I care not for such a duty, nor will I weigh or consider what is God’s will concerning me. The eye affecteth the heart. Pharaoh did not consider what it was to deal with God, and then doubleth the burdens of the Israelites. But now, on God’s part it is managed with sweetness and kindness. God from the beginning foreknew the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart, and therefore might have swept him away of a sudden, but he giveth him frequent warnings and convictions. He would have men convinced ere they are punished. Foregoing mercy showeth the righteousness of ensuing wrath. In all the progress of the story the first miracles were before him, the next upon him. And every judgment is threatened before it be executed; God telleth what he would do to warn Pharaoh. In one plague it is notable that God doth not only threaten the judgment, but sendeth a gracious warning to bid him take his cattle out of the fields: Exod. ix. 19, ‘Send therefore now, and gather thy cattle, and all that thou hast in the field; for upon every man and beast which shall be found in the field, and shall not be brought home, the hail shall come down upon them, and they shall die.’ To show that God delighteth not in the ruin and destruction of the creature, and to make Pharaoh the more liable to condemnation, and to spare such among the Egyptians as had some fear of God remaining in them, but chiefly to harden Pharaoh the more: Exod. x. 1, ‘And the Lord said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs before him.’ Moses might say, Lord, therefore let me never go to Pharaoh; but saith God, ‘Go in unto him, for I have hardened his heart.’ God continueth the means, though he denieth grace; and the wicked must be admonished, though they will not be reformed. In the hardening of sinners, God usually observeth this course: by mercies and the means of grace they are convinced and hardened at the same time; there is still new matter of glorifying God, and hardening the creature.”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ M. Silva, Explorations in Exegetical Method (Baker, 1996), p. 209.

² Cornelius Plantinga, Not the Way It’s Supposed To Be: A Brivary of Sin (Eerdmans, 1996) p. 10

³ David P. Wells, Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision (Eerdmans, 1998) p. 42.

⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Lectures on Romans, class notes, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984.

⁵ Cf. N. Geisler, “God Knows All Things” in Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom eds. D. Basinger and R. Basinger (IVP, 1986) and my review in The Westminster Theological Journal (Vol. XLVIII, Fall, 1986, No. 2) p. 394.

⁶ The Works of Thomas Manton XVIII (rpt. Maranatha Publications, 1974) p. 222