

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Exposition of Romans

Number: 141

Text: Romans 11:7-10

Date: July 5, 2009 (a.m.)

Pastor/Teacher

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THE DIFFICULT DOCTRINE OF REPROBATION (Part IV)

Just this past week, Bernie Madoff, the high flying Wall Street financier was sentenced to 150 years in prison for fraud. Over the last two decades Madoff developed a massive ponzi scheme that bilked over \$75 billion from investors (some small ones as well as wealthy ones), charities and financial institutions worldwide. Justice, it was declared at the end of the trial, was served. Was it? Thousands of people were brought to complete financial ruin. Will Madoff's jail time compensate any of them? Along similar lines, Tim Challies recently related the impression that Richard Evan's book, The Third Reich at War, made on him. "More than just another account of the Second World War, this book looks to battles, but also to atrocities and to the German home front. It provides an overall perspective on the German experience of war, from the men on the front lines, to the Jews in concentration camps, to the men and women who lived in the cities and worked in the factories. It goes so far as to look at German art and music during the war. It is, in a word, thorough. Whenever I read about Germany in the Second World War, I am amazed that so many normal people, people not unlike you and me, were involved in acts of astounding evil. While many Germans disagreed with the wholesale extermination of Jews and Gypsies and people with mental disabilities, few had the will or courage to voice their disagreements. Many were complicit in these crimes, many others were actively involved, even if they did not fully support the ideology behind them. We read of otherwise ordinary men who murdered hundreds or thousands or hundreds of thousands of helpless people. We read of monsters who found joy in torture and mutilation. We read of doctors, sworn to protect human life, who instead took the opportunity to carry out barbarous experiments on young children, torturing them and killing them with no apparent attack of conscience. Surely Satan had a field day in Germany in those days. As I read about these crimes, these atrocities, my heart cries out for justice. This is a natural cry, I think, and a good one. Yet so often it seems that these people got away with their crimes. Hitler, the mastermind of it all, died in 1945, but did so at his own hand. A bullet to the head hardly seems to satisfy the demands of justice based on the lives of 6 million Jews and countless millions of other lives destroyed in the war he began. It almost seems that he got away with it. Or Josef Mengele who carried out ruthless medical experiments at Auschwitz and, who after the war, escaped to South America where he lived in relative peace until he died of a stroke in 1979. Where is the justice in this? Did he get away with it? When we read in the Bible that the law of God is written on our hearts, surely this is some of what we mean—that we have a sense of justice and that we want this sense of justice to be served, to be satisfied. We also know from Scripture that justice will be served. Indeed, it *must* be served. And we want it to be served. Justice is "the quality of being just or fair" it is "judgment involved in the determination of rights and the assignment of rewards and punishments." But it is more. A Christian definition of justice goes further. Justice is the due reward or punishment for an act, God must punish evil. We know this. We tremble at this thought. Or we ought to. God must punish evil. When we come to know Jesus Christ, we are shocked at the reality that He willingly paid the penalty for the sins of all who would believe in Him, even those who have committed unimaginable sins. When I believed in Him I saw that He suffered for me. I deserve to be punished for all those things I've done to forsake Him. But Jesus, through His great mercy, accepted this punishment on my behalf. Justice has been served. But those who do not turn to Him must be punished for their own sin. And it is here that we see how justice will be served. The sin of even a man as blatantly evil as Adolph Eichmann, who

relentlessly hunted down Jews throughout the Reich, differs from mine only in degree. He and I are both sinners through and through. We are both sinners in thought, word and deed. But God has seen fit to extend grace to restrain me from doing all of the evil I'd otherwise so love to do. And He has accepted Jesus' work on the cross on my behalf. Justice has already been served on my behalf. But for those who do not turn to Christ, justice is still in the future. Justice hovers just over the horizon. We do not look forward to the punishment of another person with a sick glee. We do not rejoice in what they must suffer. But we do look forward to the fact that justice will finally be served. God will not and cannot allow sin to be unpunished. And while we are humbled by the grace that is ours through Christ, we still thank God that there will be justice. We do not have unlimited license to sin knowing that death allows us to escape just punishment. Instead we see that death is just the beginning, just the entrance, to the courtroom where justice will be served. Death is no escape."¹ Indeed, death simply ushers sinners into the eternal state where judgment waits (Heb. 9:22). In our passage before us, the Apostle underscores the fact that God's judicial action in this life leads to his final display of justice in the life after this.

I. GOD'S JUDICIAL HARDENING

The Apostle Paul builds his case by citing, once again, the Old Testament. This time he appeals to Deut. 29:4 along with Isaiah 29:10 and Isaiah 6:9, then finally to the words of David in Ps. 69:22. "The very fact that Ps. 69 is quoted is significant since this psalm is often used or alluded to in the NT in relationship to the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ (Matt. 27:34, 48; Mark 3:21; 15:23, 36; Luke 13:35; 23:36; John 2:17; 15:25; 19:29; Acts 1:20; Rom. 15:3; Heb. 11:26; cf. also Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 16:1). The psalm relates to the suffering and rejection of the psalmist, and includes a prayer that God would curse the psalmist's enemies (vv. 22-28). The NT writers perceived that this psalm was fulfilled in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who was unjustly rejected and suffered, even though he was filled with zeal for the house of God (Ps. 69:9). We know from Rom. 15:3 that Paul also related the psalm to Jesus, and presumably the church also was the object of suffering and rejection (cf. 8:17, 36) because they had identified with Jesus as Messiah. The curse pronounced upon the psalmist's enemies, therefore, was applied to unbelieving Jews of Paul's day who rejected Jesus as their Lord and oppressed the church."² Calvin, in his Institutes of the Christian Religion gives the following analysis to describe God's hardening:

- A. By voluntary permission, not involuntary or 'bare' permission. God determines to permit the sinful will to sin, though he could prevent it: 'It is nugatory to substitute for the [active] providence of God a bare [passive] permission; as though God was sitting in a watchtower awaiting fortuitous events, and so his decisions were dependent on the will of man' (1.18.1).
- B. By positively withdrawing the restraints of conscience and the common influences of the Spirit, after they have been resisted and made ineffectual, as taught by St. Paul in Rom. 1:24, 28.
- C. By using the agency of Satan (described in John 13:2, 27): 'I grant, indeed, that God often actuates (agere) the reprobate by the interposition of Satan; but in such a manner that Satan himself acts his part by the divine impulse and proceeds only so far as God appoints' (1.18.2). 'According to one view of the subject,' it is said: 'If the prophet be deceived when he has spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet' (Ezek. 14:9). But according to another, God is said himself to give men over to a reprobate mind (Rom. 1:28) and to the vilest lusts; because he is the principal author of his own righteous retribution, and Satan is only the dispenser of it' (1.18.1)."³

II. IT'S MANIFESTATION

How does Paul describe this *hardening*? And what were the reasons for it?

- A. A spirit of stupor. This results in an inability to perceive things as God has revealed them, and as such refers to a defective understanding. Their intellectual or mental faculties were retarded—not in the sense that their I.Q. is reduced but that their understanding is 'darkened' as Paul alluded to earlier (Rom. 1:21). "Religious apathy and lethargy," wrote Shedd, "shows that God has ceased to strive with the man, and has left him to himself."⁴ David, after his great sin made specific reference to this when he prayed, "Do not cast me from your presence or take

your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11 compare with Ps. 27:9).

- B. Turn their blessings into punishments. Paul cites David’s plea that the very things that were seen as a sign of God’s favor would become “a snare and a trap,” so that they stumble and fall in their blindness. Psalm 69, as noted, is a Messianic psalm – one that prophetically anticipates the person and work of Christ. In fact, as Hodge points out, “No portion of the Old Testament Scriptures is more frequently referred to as descriptive of Christ’s suffering than this Psalm and Psalm 22.”⁵ It is in this light that the Psalm should be read. “The imprecations in this verse and those following it,” wrote Alexander, “are revolting only when considered as the expression of malignant selfishness. If uttered by God, they shock no reader’s sensibilities, not should they, when considered as the language of an ideal person, representing the whole class of righteous sufferers, and particularly him, who, though he prayed for his murderers while dying (Luke xxiii. 34), had before applied the words of this very passage to the unbelieving Jews (Matt. xxiii. 38), as Paul did afterwards (Rom. xi. 9, 10). The general doctrine of providential retribution, far from being confined to the Old Testament, is distinctly taught in many of our Saviour’s parables. See Matt. xxi. 41; xxii. 7; xxiv.51.”⁶
- C. A Retribution. The KJV reads “Recompence.” The word *antapodoma* denotes a repayment. The Apostle places this at the end of the sentence to accent it more emphatically. In other words it underscores the truth of Rom. 2:5, that unbelief is earning interest in terms of God’s wrath (cf. John 3:36). God’s judicial hardening is deserved.

CONCLUSION: In the Bible the proclamation of the gospel is not in the least constrained through the belief that God has “mercy on whom he will have mercy and whom he will be hardeneth” (Rom. 9:18). Jesus said: “It is the Father’s good pleasure to conceal things from the wise and the prudent and to reveal them to children.” This statement is followed by Jesus’ invitation: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:25-28). Election and call go hand in hand! Acts contains both the confession, ‘As many as were ordained to eternal life believed,’ and the call to faith, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house’ (Acts 13:48; 16:31). In the midst of the section of the epistle to the Romans in which he testifies to the sovereignty of God’s grace, Paul speaks about the significance of preaching (Rom. 10:14-15). The gospel is intended for everyone. Yet not all share in salvation. God’s counsel stands behind the former as well as the latter fact. Therefore the one does not diminish the other.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.challies.com/archives/articles/death-is-no-escape.php>

² T. R. Schreiner, Romans: The Baker Exegetical Commentary (Baker, 1998) p. 588.

³ As cited by W. G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology, 3rd ed. (P & R, 2004) p. 356.

⁴ W. G. T. Shedd, A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978) p. 333.

⁵ Charles Hodge, Romans (Banner of Truth, 1972) p. 358

⁶ J. A. Alexander as cited C. H. Spurgeon, The Treasury of David VIII (rpt. Baker, 1978) p. 283.

⁷ J. V. Genderen and W. H. Velema, Concise Reformed Dogmatics (P & R, 2008) p. 239.