

“Diamonds are Displayed Best on Black Velvet”

Exodus 7-10

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One of the most common doubts we believers have is the doubt regarding our eternal relationship with God.

Sometimes our doubt is brought on by crisis – something happens that shakes us out of the comfort of our routine.

Sometimes our doubt is brought on by our own sin – our failure to live up to God’s call on our lives.

Even among true believers there is the constant temptation to think our relationship with God is somehow determined and secured by **our** actions – if we live up to a certain standard then we will be acceptable to God.

Concomitant with that is an underlying fear that if we don’t measure up, God will change his mind regarding us.

I hear that theology in the fears that people express but I also hear it in the confidence of some people when they say everything is okay between them and God because they are feeling good about their performance at the moment.

The fundamental difference between the religion of the Bible and all other religions is on this point.

God says we are sought, found, saved and eternally bound to him by God’s doing alone.

All other religions place the burden of a relationship with God on us at least in some measure.

As I have pointed out several times in our on-going study of the early part of the book of Exodus, God is preparing his people to trust him fully.

With the Israelites, as with us, there was a tendency, a predisposition to see a relationship with God as the result of the cooperative effort of both God and them.

God wants them to know that their deliverance from Egypt, just as our deliverance from sin and death, is all of grace.

God wants them and us to place our full confidence in him and place no confidence in ourselves.

He wants us to realize that from beginning to end, from the first moment we have any interest in God to the time when we stand before God in eternity – it is all of grace.

When we come to believe that, then we are truly trusting God rather than trusting at all in ourselves.

With that comes great assurance of our relationship with God.

When we realize that we have been called to him, not by our merit or efforts but solely by his choice then we can rest secure in his love – no longer assuming we have to earn it or maintain it.

He loves us because he loves us because he loves us because he loves us – there is nothing in us, somewhere way behind it, causing that love; it is caused by God alone.

All of that might be summarized as the sovereignty of God in our salvation – our salvation is uncaused by anything outside of God himself – he has chosen to save us.

Now in a way that we are not accustomed to, God is going to demonstrate that sovereignty in his choice of Israel.

He wants them to know that their salvation is wholly of grace that they might trust him fully in the future.

To do that God is going to show them his sovereignty in grace **and** his sovereignty in wrath.

Just as the beauty of a diamond is displayed best against the backdrop of black velvet, so the marvel of God's sovereign grace is seen best against the backdrop of God's sovereign wrath.

In Exodus chapters 7-10 God is sovereignly moving in two directions at the same time: He is going to marvelously, miraculously and with no help from the Israelites, draw them by his grace out of Egypt.

At the same time he is doing to display his awesome wrath against and total control over the mightiest king and kingdom on earth.

It is that righteous wrath of God that has our attention today.

Please stand for the reading of God's holy Word:

Exodus 9:8-17

"Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Take handfuls of soot from a furnace and have Moses toss it into the air in the presence of Pharaoh. ⁹ It will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt, and festering boils will break out on men and animals throughout the land."

So they took soot from a furnace and stood before Pharaoh. Moses tossed it into the air, and festering boils broke out on men and animals. ¹¹ The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians. ¹² But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, `This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, ¹⁴ or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. ¹⁶ But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You still set yourself against my people and will not let them go.

May God bless the hearing of his word by giving us understanding.
Pray

There is at least one sentence in this text that bothers us:

Exodus 9:12 “But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he (Pharaoh) would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses.”

The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

Just to make certain that we didn’t get it wrong, the author says the same thing many times in this text.

Before Moses even went back to Egypt this is what God told him:

Exodus 4:21

“The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But **I will harden his heart** so that he will not let the people go.

Then before Moses went to the Pharaoh a second time, this is what the Lord said:

Exodus 7:1-4

“Then the LORD said to Moses... **I will harden Pharaoh's heart**, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you.

17 times in this context God speaks of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

To harden the heart is to make it unresponsive, unwilling.

7:13 “Yet **Pharaoh's heart became hard**...just as the LORD had said.

7:22 “and **Pharaoh's heart became hard**;

8:15 “But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, **he hardened his heart** ...just as the LORD had said.

8:19 But **Pharaoh's heart was hard**... just as the LORD had said.

8:32 “But this time also **Pharaoh hardened his heart**...

9:12 “But **the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart...just as the LORD had said.**

9:34-35 **He(Pharaoh) and his officials hardened their hearts.** ³⁵ So **Pharaoh's heart was hard ...just as the LORD had said**

10:1-2 “Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for **I have hardened his heart**

10:20 “But **the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart**

10:27 “But **the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart**

11:10 But **the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart**

14:4, 8 “And **I will harden Pharaoh's heart... The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh**

14:17 “**I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians**

The usual explanation for this “hardening” is that God is simply judging Pharaoh for Pharaoh’s own actions.

Pharaoh hardened his heart against God and so God responded by hardening it more.

I think that explanation is incomplete given the witness of Scripture, which I will attempt to explain in a moment but I also think it is not much help in explaining God’s action.

We try to justify God by saying that God is simply responding in judgment to Pharaoh.

Even if that were the explanation, should we not ask how God could contribute to a man’s eternal destruction?

- We don’t like that God would arbitrarily harden a man’s heart.
- Is it any better that God would harden a man’s heart so that he cannot respond, while the man is still alive?
- Isn’t God responsible for always holding out hope and even positively working to bring a man to God?

- How can we justify God making it impossible?

So what **is** happening here?

- Four times in the context, God says that he **plans** to harden Pharaoh's heart.
- Six times in the context, God says that **he** hardened Pharaoh's heart.
- Three times it says that **Pharaoh** hardened his heart.
- Four times it simply says that Pharaoh's heart **became hard** (without specifying who did it).

What is noteworthy is that most of the times that it says that Pharaoh hardened his heart or simply that his heart was hardened it also says that it happened "just as the Lord said."

This would seem to indicate the Lord's initiative even then.

We may like to say that God only responds in judgment on Pharaoh's hard-heartedness but I don't think the text allows us to reduce it to that.

The text seems to make God, not Pharaoh, the deciding factor in Pharaoh's actions.

It is God who is acting sovereignly not only in grace toward the Israelites but also in wrath toward Pharaoh.

I think God is saying something powerful to the Israelites.

"As sovereignly as I am working in the heart and circumstances of Pharaoh, I am working in grace toward you.

I am in full control – You are not the cause of my grace, you are merely the recipients of the wonder of it.

You can rest assured – it is all of grace!"

That this **is** the lesson of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart I think I can prove by moving to the NT reference to these same events - Romans 9.

There too the purpose of the Apostle is to build the confidence of God's people that their relationship with God is by grace alone and is not dependent in any way on them.

In Romans chapter 8, the apostle Paul promised that for those who are in Christ Jesus nothing can separate them from the love of God.

In fact, in Romans 8 Paul articulates some of the grandest truths of the Scripture:

8:28 God is working all things, even the hardest things of life, together for the good of those who belong to God.

8:29-30 God will finish what he starts - those he chose and predestined to be saved will, in fact, be saved - they will be resurrected to live with him forever.

And then in 8:31-39, we see, God's unfailing love is so great that absolutely nothing can separate us from him - not death, not the circumstances of life, not angels, not demons, not the present, not the future, **not anything** shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A dozen different ways, Paul has declared - those whom God chooses he keeps - he will never fail them.

But it doesn't take much Bible knowledge to cause one to ask, "What about the Jews?"

Isn't the O.T. filled with promises to the Jews?

Look around, how many Jews do you see in the church?

If most of the Jews, the specially chosen people, aren't Christians - but apparently, for the most part, are lost - how much confidence can I place in God's choice of me?

Didn't God start something with the Jews that he didn't finish?

If it didn't work out for them - how can I be certain it will finish well for me?

God's word then in Romans 9 is a perfect commentary on the point that I think God is making in Exodus – it is all God, not us!

And so in Romans 9, just as in our Exodus text, God will again show his sovereignty both in grace and in wrath.

We belong to God by no merit or effort of our own as proven by how God does the choosing.

Some Jews thought that all Jews were the chosen people of God.

But God says, Romans 9:6-8 "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

Just because you Jews are descended from Israel does necessarily make you God's child.

Only those who were chosen by God are truly God's children.

Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac.

Paul says that only Isaac was the child of promise and note also that he was chosen even before he was born – just as we are.

And in case we missed the point that this is the sovereign choice of God, uncaused by anything in us or even foreseen in us, Paul goes on to write,

Romans 9:10-13 "Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls--she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Paul again notes that God's choice of the one was made before the two were born and **now even more specifically**, God's choice of the one over the other was done before either of them had done anything good or bad.

He is dramatically drawing attention to God's choice not being based on merit or effort on our part.

It is not something **in us** that causes God to choose us or not choose us.

It is something in God – “in order that God’s purpose in election might stand.”

God’s choice is in no way influenced by the people he chooses.

It is unmerited favor – Grace alone!

Now here is where Paul’s point becomes even clearer on the sovereignty of God’s choice.

Fully understanding the implications of what Paul has just said, someone might say then “Is God unjust?”

If God chooses some people and doesn’t choose others for nothing that he sees in them but solely because of his free choice - doesn’t that make God unjust, unfair, arbitrary?

It is as if Paul reads our minds?

And how does Paul answer our question?

He says God is not unjust at all!

Now here Paul has a chance to clear up a misunderstanding if we have misunderstood him.

We **thought we heard** Paul saying that God chooses some and doesn’t choose others not based on what God sees in the people but solely based on God’s free choice.

We **thought we heard** Paul saying that God’s choice of us was not even caused by his seeing into the future and foreknowing that we would have faith.

That’s right, here is Paul’s chance to clear up his message.

Surely, we think, it must be something God foresees in those who will be saved or else God is being arbitrary and that would be unjust or unfair.

But what does Paul do?

Does he write, “No, no, God’s not unfair; He knew who would have faith, he knew who would respond, he knew who would be faithful and those are the ones he chose”?

Here's Paul's chance to say that if we misunderstood him, but what does he do?

He states the truth of God's sovereign, free, unfettered choice of who would belong to him **even more strongly than before.**

Paul will defend God's justice but very differently than we would have expected.

First in response to the question: Is God unjust? Paul says: Romans 9:15-16 "For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

The first answer to our charge that God is unjust is that **our charge is faulty** - we aren't even focusing on the correct issue.

The issue is not justice, the issue is mercy.

Paul has already very powerfully made the case, earlier in the book of Romans that every person deserves eternal punishment and God is in no way obligated to intervene.

If everyone went to hell - justice would be served.

When Paul writes about God choosing some to have life - that is not an issue of justice, as if God was being unfair, it is a matter of mercy.

God's choices are absolutely uncaused by anything outside of himself.

Look at V16 "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

If God chooses to have mercy on some who deserve wrath - that is not unjust it is merciful.

But there is a second way that Paul responds to the charge that God is unfair or unjust.

Romans 9:17 "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

This quote puts us right back into our story from Exodus because it is a quote from Exodus 9:16.

I wish Paul would have said that Pharaoh simply got exactly what he deserved and therefore justice was carried out.

Paul could have so easily written that and it would have been entirely accurate.

Pharaoh like every other human being deserves God's wrath and if God doesn't choose to intervene God can't be rightly charged with injustice.

But Paul doesn't take that easy way out - instead he keeps beating the drum of God's sovereign choice.

Romans 9:18 "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Even though he continues to run the risk of people charging God with unfairness - Paul wants to drive home his point:

God's choice of you, out of all the people of the world, was a matter of awesome mercy - it was not based on your worthiness or your actions present or future - it was all of grace.

And because it doesn't depend on you - you can have great confidence that his keeping you won't depend on you. It too is a matter of God's sovereign gracious choice.

To make that point Paul **uses the counterpoint**: God also sovereignly chooses whom he will harden.

The point in this context is not judgment on sin.

The point here is the sovereignty of God's choices – his choices are uncaused by anything outside of himself.

And what does Paul use as an illustration of that?

He uses God's dealings with the Pharaoh.

As God said it in Exodus 4:21 "The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But **I will harden his heart** so that he will not let the people go.

We are troubled by this and I confess I don't fully understand it – but, again, the point being made is that God is in charge, God is in control, God is making the choices, not based on what he sees in us, therefore we can rest fully assured in our relationship with to him.

Now to prove that Paul is saying that God sovereignly chooses on whom to demonstrate his wrath and on whom to show mercy, all we need to do is look at the next question asked of Paul:

Romans 9:19 “One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"

This question only makes sense if vv15-18 not only taught that God shows mercy sovereignly but that God also hardens people sovereignly.

If God was only responsible for showing mercy and not responsible for hardening people I don't think this question would be asked.

And so Paul responds:

Romans 9:20-21 “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, `Why did you make me like this?' " ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

We don't like that response but Paul says:

Be careful that you don't ask questions of God that are improper.

The issue is not that we can't ask honest questions but that once we have the answer we don't blame God if we don't like the answer; that we don't try to make God the evil one for doing it his way.

The very question, “Then why does God still blame us?” is stated in such a way as to find fault with God.

Shall the person made, say to his maker, "Why did you make me this way?"

The answer is given in an illustration:

Doesn't the potter have the right to take one lump of clay and make one thing for special use and another for common use?
The obvious answer is, "Yes, he does!"

I can't go as far as to say that it is Paul's intention to teach that God **created** some people to go to hell.

How God sovereignly hardens and still preserves human accountability for sin we are not told.

And so this passage, like the one in Exodus, does raise some difficult issues that I don't think we can fully understand.

But Paul was able to hold two Scriptural truths in proper tension even though to us they can appear contradictory.

1. God's sovereign choices.
2. Human responsibility.

Paul doesn't fully reconcile those two truths but accepts both.
So do I.

Paul's first response to the question of, 'if God sovereignly does the choosing, how then can he find fault with anyone' is:

“you actually have no right to be the judge of God”.

Paul's second response is given in Verses 22-23

God has the right to deal with sinful human beings in any way he chooses - consistent with his character - as he has already stated in V18 and restates here.

Romans 9:22-23 “What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction? What if he did this **to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy**, whom he prepared in advance for glory...”

God is perfectly within his rights in showing wrath on those who are prepared for destruction

AND

God is perfectly within his rights in showing mercy on whomever he chooses.

But notice also the reason attributed to God in showing his wrath and his mercy.

By showing his wrath it highlights ever more brightly his mercy.

It is when we know "I once was lost" that we sing "but now am found" and when I know the "wretch" I am that it becomes "Amazing Grace".

The splendor of his undeserved mercy shines brightest against the backdrop of his deserved wrath.

And most importantly, his choice of us is wholly and only of grace.

We don't deserve it, we don't earn it, we can't lose it.

God has acted **sovereignly** in his choice of you.

Other Reading:

The Justification of God by John Piper

Chosen for Life by C. Samuel Storms;

Chosen by God by R.C. Sproul;

For an alternative view see Chosen But Free by Norman Geisler

See also:

"Free Will – A Slave" by Spurgeon New Park Street Chapel Dec 2, 1855.

"Election" by Spurgeon