

Series: God Saves #1451

Title: Romans 8.29b, 9.15, 17-23

The Mystery of God's Providence

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. We have spent some time in the Book of Exodus looking at this matter of God hardening Pharaoh's heart. And the reason for this is because we read the Apostle Paul, in Romans chapter 9, referring us back to Exodus when he said this. He will quote God speaking in the Scripture. Romans 9, verses 17-18, **"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.' 18 So then [God] has mercy on whom He desires, and [God] hardens whom He desires."**

Pertinent to the subject before us, double predestination, we want to know: by God hardening Pharaoh's heart does that mean God does violence to Pharaoh's will? Does God create fresh evil in Pharaoh's heart? On the positive side of predestination we learned that God does intervene in the will of Christians, to sovereignly give us the gift of faith, a faith that we then deploy into our belief in Jesus Christ, and we are saved. On the negative side of predestination does God intervene in the will of unbelievers, like this ruler Pharaoh, to give them *unbelief*, sin, and evil such that they will deploy that in rejecting God, in rejecting Christ? Is that what is meant by double predestination? We said, and have said repeatedly, *no!* That is not what we mean, that is not what the Bible means, friends – when God hardens Pharaoh's heart He inserts *no* fresh evil there. God is never the author of sin and evil. Never.

Then why is God hardening Pharaoh's heart? The answer is so that God will be honored, so that God will be glorified. Our Lord does *everything with purpose!* There is always a reason for the acts of God. God hardens that evil heart such that He directs that evil – supernaturally, sovereignly, providentially – for the honor and glory of *Himself!* And that is *pretty awesome*. My prayer has been this is helpful to you in seeing what the other side of predestination is about and what it is not about.

To explore this truth, we went back to Exodus and did some work in the text there. Our brother-in-Christ, our theologian/pastor friend John Piper was a big help to us. And I would like to follow him somewhat and some more at the start of this week, going back to Romans 9 so we can tie all of this together. Remember, the main point we took out of the Exodus texts last week is that God does what God does for His own honor and glory. He is greatly worshiped because of what the Lord did, and *how He did it*, in saving the Israelites from Egypt and the Pharaoh!

And this is precisely what Paul the Apostle picks up in Romans 9. God is never merely responding to what human beings do. God was fully in-charge back in Exodus. He told Moses He would harden Pharaoh's heart *before* Pharaoh hardened his own heart. And God did that to display God's glory! You see, God is free to do whatever God wants. As I said when we discussed human free will, the Lord is far more free than we are. That's why Paul writes, "[God] has mercy on whom He desires, and [God] hardens whom He desires." He does all of this according to **"the counsel of His will."** (Ephesians 1.11.)

When you read Romans 9 for yourself, and I hope you have done that or will do that, you'll see that in verse 15 Paul quotes God speaking to Moses. This is Romans 9.15, **"For [God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" And then down in verse 18, which I have already read, Paul says, "So then [God] has mercy on whom He desires, and [God] hardens whom He desires."** These two verses go together. In verse 18 Paul reiterates what he said in verse 15. The emphasis in these verses is that *God is free to show mercy to whomever He desires*. Let me say that again because you need to capture this: God is free to show mercy to whomever He desires. That is the positive side of predestination.

Likewise, *God is free to harden whomever He desires*. God is free to harden whomever He desires. That's Paul's point as Romans 9, verse 18 continues (quote), "And [God] hardens whom He desires." This the negative side of predestination. And God makes these decisions within the counsel of His own will. As Piper correctly states,

“This is decisive. Nothing in man, good or bad, past or present, or foreseen determines who is hardened and who is shown mercy (*Providence*, 440).”

Of course, and naturally, this raises a question within us: we are all sinners, so why do some sinners receive mercy and some sinners receive hardening? If we ask the Apostle Paul here is what he will say: “[God] has mercy on whom He desires, and [God] hardens whom He desires.” This is an answer for which, if we are honest, does not totally satisfy us. And then the mystery deepens. Holy God is the One who decides whom is hardened. And yet, as Scripture clearly teaches, the ones who have hardened hearts, the sinners who are unrepentant, face the judgment of God. God holds them accountable for their sin. God judges the people whose hearts He has hardened.

Oh! We do not like this! But just because we do not like something the Bible says does not mean the Bible is wrong in saying it; does not mean we should reinterpret what the Bible says to fit our sensibilities. I like what John Piper writes when he teaches this doctrine, “I have not removed a mystery; I have stated a mystery (444).” Yes. We are doing the same in these days together. We are not removing mystery. Friends, we are stating mystery. How it is that God freely hardens the heart *and* preserves human accountability we are not told. Oh yes, there is a lot we are not told. What we have to do is accept what we are told and leave it at that. We do not have God’s permission to go beyond what His Word says.

Piper continues, quote, “My hope is that you will begin to reflexively say to such texts, ‘Yes, there it is – the perplexing providence of God – and yes, [God] knows how to do this in a way that neither forces good people to be hateful against their will, nor diminishes any accountability for sin, nor tarnishes [God’s] own immaculate holiness and goodness and justice.’ *How* God governs the human heart in its acts of sinning, we are not told. *That* [God] does, we are told over and over...This is why stories of God’s providence abound in Scripture but explanations of the mystery of *how* it works do not. Our faith needs the certainty of the fact, not the fathoming of the mystery (447).” End quote.

I hope that you will take hold of that statement, and especially this: “Our faith needs the certainty of the fact, not the fathoming of the mystery.” That is quite an important sentence and true conclusion, but needs to be properly digested. The fathoming of the mystery is often what we desire most. We do not usually desire the certainty of fact: this is what God does, this is what God says. Therefore, I accept this. I cannot explain this to the satisfaction, perhaps, of my curiosity, of other’s curiosity but I will receive the fact and leave the mystery to endure. Are we willing to do that?

As we end, listen to Paul, anticipating our struggle. Here he is writing in Romans 9, right after verses 17 and 18, and he says this, beginning in verse 19, **“You will say to me then, ‘Why does [God] still find fault? For who resists His will?’²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?²² What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?²³ And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory...”**

In other words, who do we think we are to demand of God answers to our mystery? God is the potter, we are the clay. God is the molder, we are the molded. God does whatever God wants to do with each of us. God has mercy on some, God hardens others and He does both for God’s own glory!

Are you with me on this? Do you follow? I would love to hear from you. You can send me an email or a note in the mail. Tell me how this strikes you. Do you have questions or comments? Let me know. mark@godisministry.org and God Is, PO Box 802, Winchester Massachusetts 01890. Join us again tomorrow because God Is.

---END---