

## Sovereign Mercy

Romans 9:10-18

This is one of the most fascinating chapters in the whole Bible, because, among other things, it answers the question of why God hardened Pharaoh's heart. That's a real stumbling block for many people. It was for me, and though I was able to answer that question many years ago, the question is still fresh in my mind. Because it seems unfair that God would do that, unrighteous even. That's another of those questions Paul asks himself so that he can answer it.

v.14 "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!"

As a nation, we have been compelled to think about justice and fairness this week, with the verdict on Friday in the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse. There are lots of differing opinions in our country about that verdict of not guilty, with many people including myself holding very strong opinions. But my purpose in mentioning that here is because such a prominent trial always brings to our attention these sorts of questions of fairness, equity, unrighteousness. And we need to be able to evaluate those questions, even as a jury in that one specific trial had to make a very specific and definitive judgment. Ultimately, a judgment of righteousness. So, "Is there unrighteousness with God?" Paul tells us "no." Absolutely not.

But that then raises another question of equity, namely how God blame someone, or hold him accountable for his sin, if God is the one who hardened his heart? So we read,

v.19 "You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

That question makes sense, doesn't it? It needs an answer. If

God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then Pharaoh didn't have a choice, some would say. And since Pharaoh couldn't resist God's will to harden his heart, God can't then blame Pharaoh for what he did, they would say. Those are the questions we come to this morning. And with them comes the subject is that so often controversial and disputed upon Christians, with much disagreement, the subject of election.

I hope you know me well enough to know I have no interest in a theological argument which has as its primary goal simply winning the argument. I don't argue with people about anything, theology especially. But I do want to answer helpful and useful questions, even as I sought answers to those questions for myself as I sought earnestly to understand what the Bible teaches especially about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

I often tell the story of how I came to know and understand the reformed faith, and how I first came to be part of a presbyterian church. As a college student, and a Christian, I was attending a church where the pastor was faithfully teaching from the Bible, chapter by chapter, week after week. It was plain, simple expositional preaching, taking a particular text from the Bible and giving both explanation and application to it. I was learning, and growing, but I noticed very clearly one week when he failed to explain what the Bible meant when it said that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. The text for his sermon clearly said that, and I very much wanted an explanation. I was disappointed because he never mentioned that part of the text.

Some time later, when my car wouldn't start one Sunday morning and I was forced to walk to church if I wanted to go anywhere, I went to a new church that was meeting on campus, a church where I some friends I knew were attending. It was a presbyterian church, and it was there I first began to hear

answers to these sorts of questions. It was there I first began to understand what Paul meant when he writes “the purpose of God according to election.” I can say very honestly, I chose to believe in election at the beginning because I had decided to submit my mind to believe whatever was in the Bible. I believed in election because I read about it here in Romans 9, and I couldn’t escape the plain meaning of the words. In time, as I came to more fully understand it, I learned to appreciate greatly what it meant, and our text this morning has always had a central place in that understanding. So I preach to you today in that context. So with no interest in merely winning an argument, let me try to explain what Paul is writing so clearly to us here, beginning with,

### **I. A FOCUS UPON GOD’S CHOICE.**

We looked at that choice last week in verses 6-10, noting those key words in,  
v.6. “For they are not all Israel who are of Israel.”

As we studied last week, the idea is that not all of the true people of God, which is the true meaning of Israel, not all of those people of God are of the nation of Israel descended from the ancestry of Abraham. Not everyone in the nation of Israel, not every Jew, actually belongs to the household and family of God. That’s Paul’s point. Not all Israel, ethnic Israel, is actually of the true Israel who are the people of God. And Paul begins his explanation by emphasizing Isaac as the child of promise, whose descendants would become the children of promise, the children of God.

The first of those descendants was, of course, Jacob. And what jumps out at us as we read about Jacob in the Bible is this focus upon God’s choice. So why was the line of God’s people drawn from the descendants of Jacob and not through the descendants of Esau? Well, that is actually an easy question to

answer. Maybe more difficult to understand fully, but easy to answer. Because the Bible tells us the answer. It was a matter of God’s choice. God chose Jacob.

v.11-12

At this point, that question of why is an appropriate one. Why did God choose Jacob and not Esau? Why? What was the basis of that choice? Please don’t miss the obviousness of the answer Paul provides. First of all, Paul emphasizes, is that choice was not a matter of anything in those two boys. They were twins. The choice was made while they were still in the womb, before they had done anything, good or bad! That’s the point of verse 11. There was nothing in those two boys that would serve as the basis or reason for God’s choice.

And actually, it’s even more focused than that. The boys were even neutral, as it were, equals. Jacob was the one who would be the conniving scoundrel. Even from birth, Jacob was causing trouble.

Gen.25:24 “So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. 25 And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.”

The name Jacob means deceiver, supplanter. The one who grabbed the heel. And he would be the one who would trick Esau into selling his birthright as the firstborn son. And steal the blessing of his father.

Gen. 27:34 “When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me—me also, O my father!” 35 But he said, “Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing.” 36

And Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!” And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

So there was nothing in Jacob or Esau that would justify God’s choosing the one and not the other. Thus the point is made explicitly. It was,

**A. A choice according to God’s own purpose.**

v.11. “...that the purpose of God according to election might stand.”

The purpose of God according to election. The purpose of God. That’s a really important word, a really important concept. It refers to God’s determination to bring to pass what he has determined. It is a predetermined purpose, a resolve, to accomplish his own will. It is a word used as well in,

Eph. 1:1 “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

God has a purpose. A plan. A determination within his own mind and will. And he brings everything to pass according to that purpose. According to the counsel of his will. God chose Jacob instead of Esau. And that is defined as God’s calling.

v.11. “...that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls)...”

Thus this choice of Jacob is,

**B. A choice according to God’s own calling.**

Calling refers to an effective choice, a personal selection that brings about the intended result. Maybe something like drafting a

player in a professional sports team. To call someone is to draft them to be a member of your team.

This word “calling” is also a very important biblical word, and doctrine. Our confession and catechisms use the language of effectual calling, to emphasize the active power of God who calls. The calling of God is contrasted here with that which we work for and earn ourselves.

v.11. “...not of works but of Him who calls...”

Thus the whole of our salvation comes not by the benefit of any works of our own hands, but rather as that which we have by the calling of God. Our salvation itself is identified as our calling, the calling of God.

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.”

2 Tim. 1:8 “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.”

So it is that Jacob was the recipient of God’s calling, according to God’s own purpose. And it was,

**C. A choice according to God’s own affection.**

In other words, it was a choice determined and defined by God’s love.

v.13 “As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

And just so you understand that this was always God’s plan

and purpose, Paul is quoting from the Old Testament prophet Malachi.

So what's the point? Plainly and simply, that God has a purpose, the counsel of his own will, by which he brings to pass everything that happens in this world. That's what these words mean. Jacob is the preeminent example of the electing love of God, he is the object of that choice God made according to his own purpose and determination. Thus we come to the question of verse 14. Is that fair? It is,

## II. A QUESTION OF EQUITY.

v.14

Well, we certainly have to answer that question quickly and firmly. NO. Certainly not. There is not unrighteousness with God. It is not unfair. There is not a denial of equity. That's the easy part of the answer, the short answer. The more difficult part is the longer answer. The details. The explanation. God chose Jacob and not Esau, calling one to be the representative head of the nation of Israel, the other to represent all those whom he has not chosen. And there was no ground in either of them for either decision. It was solely a matter of God's choice, sovereign choice, which is to say, a choice he is entitled to make without any reason and accountability to us. It is God's calling, God's purpose, God's affection of love, and God's own eternal purpose.

And let me admit it, that seems unfair. Especially to our modern American minds. We have a sense of equity that obligates us not to discriminate, we are required, often by law, to treat everyone equal. And when our nation tries to do battle against harmful and even wicked forms of discrimination, that can be a good thing, a very good thing. So to use the southern examples from the last century, you can't have drinking fountains

only for white people and other drinking fountains only for black. There are now laws against such discrimination. To do otherwise would certainly be unjust, unrighteous.

But we have to be careful when we try to impose that sort of uniformity in every situation. The reality is, I don't have to treat everyone exactly the same. That's not the definition of justice or righteousness. If I am an employer, and an employee has great need, I am free to offer whatever salary I wish, even one based upon need. I don't have to give everyone the exact same amount. Similarly, if I do a good deed or show an act of kindness to one person, that doesn't mean I am obligated to do the same for everyone.

So here's how I would answer that question of equity and fairness.

v.14 "Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!"

### A. God's mercy is not a duty he is obligated to fulfill.

If God shows kindness to one person, he is not duty bound to show that same kindness to everyone. That's the point here. God's mercy to Jacob does not obligate him to show mercy to Esau. He is free to exercise his mercy according to his own will and pleasure. In other words,

v.15

Paul is quoting from the Old Testament again, from a very prominent passage, the occasion of God's encouragement to Moses after Mt. Sinai, when Moses was instructed to lead the people of Israel into the promised land.

Ex. 33:12 Then Moses said to the LORD, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people.' But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight." 13 Now therefore, I

pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people.” 14 And He said, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” 15 Then he said to Him, “If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. 16 For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth.” 17 So the LORD said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.” 18 And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.” 19 Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” 20 But He said, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.” 21 And the LORD said, “Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. 22 So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. 23 Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.”

So this willingness to show mercy is God’s definition of his glory—that’s what Moses asked to see, God’s glory. God shows him his goodness, goodness demonstrated by the willingness and the choice to show mercy. “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” The Hebrew word in Exodus 33 is gracious. “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

That’s the point!

## **B. God’s mercy is a work of grace.**

God’s glory is in his willingness to show mercy! Not mercy to everyone—God has not duty or obligation to do that. In fact, he has no obligation to show mercy to anyone. That’s what makes it gracious. And he is gracious to those to whom he chooses to be gracious. Why? Because he is gracious in the first place! It’s not because of anything in them. That’s the point. That’s the nature of God’s grace. He shows that grace as the outworking of his own love and kindness.

Is it unfair that God is gracious to some and not to others? Not at all. Because if he were obligated to be gracious to everyone, then it wouldn’t be grace, would it? It would be an obligation of duty. And the whole point of this whole discussion is that God is not obligated to be merciful to anyone! Instead, his mercy is all of grace. His choice of Jacob is a demonstration of that grace, above all others! So when it comes to our salvation, when it comes to our relationship with God, what matters is not anything that we do. What matters is whether or not God is gracious. The statement in verse 16 is true for us as well.

v.16 “So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”

It’s all of God, all of his grace. As I read earlier,

2 Tim. 1:9. “...[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.”

Is there unrighteousness with God? No. Rather there is grace, grace to those to whom he has chosen to be gracious. And that grace is his glory!

v.13. “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

Then comes the example of Pharaoh.

### III. A LIVING EXAMPLE OF SOVEREIGN MERCY.

v.17-18

I won't skip over those verses, nor will I act embarrassed as if I wish they were there in the first place. Rather, having come to understand this declaration of mercy, I so appreciate this living example. Even from,

#### A. The hardening of Pharaoh.

That idea of hardening goes along with the idea of calling, for ultimately, with everyone, it is one or the other. But the main idea is this, that while God's grace is sovereign, that is, he can choose himself those to whom he will be gracious, there is also power in this. Power to show mercy. Not just to feel mercy or kindness, but to show it, to demonstrate it. And, therefore also, to show the power NOT to show mercy. In other words, to harden.

Think about the context of this in the book of Exodus. In terms of the history of God's people Israel, why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? There is an easy answer to that question. So that God would be the one who would deliver the people out of Egypt. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh wouldn't let the people go himself, so that the people wouldn't be tempted to give praise and thanks to Pharaoh.

God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to show more clearly, by contrast, the riches of his grace to the people of Israel. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that God could show the fullness of his grace to his chosen people.

Now, is that unfair? As if Pharaoh really wanted to be nice to Israel but God stopped him. No. No such straw man exists. Whenever God hardens a heart, the heart was already hard to begin with. And we read that Pharaoh also hardened his own

heart. So there is no such thing as a good person wanting to serve and love God but can't because God hardened his heart. No, God's hardening of the heart is his judgment upon those whose hearts are already dead in sin. And, in fact, every human heart is, by nature, dead in sin, and if God wasn't gracious to some, then no one would every be saved.

So God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that his grace to his true people would be magnified. So great is his power. And so evident is his purpose,

#### B. The purpose of hardening.

Paul describes that purpose so plainly.

v.17

God's purpose is that his name be declared in all the earth. Over and over again that is declared in the book of Exodus. I'll read just one example,

Ex. 10:1 "Now the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, that I may show these signs of Mine before him, 2 and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son the mighty things I have done in Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD."

God hardens the hearts of wicked and rebellious unbelievers so that he can show forth, by contrast, the glory of his grace to those who are the objects of his saving love. He hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he can magnify the display of his grace to the people of Israel, "that My name may be declared in all the earth."

That's what a right and proper understanding of election does for you, it gives you that sense of God's glory, that you might

marvel with thanksgiving and gratitude if that mercy is shown to you. Because you know full well that if God didn't first love you, you wouldn't love him. If God didn't choose you, you would not have chosen him. If God had not been merciful to you, despite your own wicked sinfulness, if God had not been merciful to you, then you would have lived and died in your sin, unto an eternal condemnation which you would so fully deserve.

And so this sovereign mercy, this idea of election, of God's choosing us, is nothing less than the greatest of all the spiritual blessings that we have in Christ. Thus we read these words of doxology in,

Eph. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved."

It is that God whom we worship and adore here this morning.