

4. The preceding context establishes God's sovereignty in mercy and hardening as those matters of divine choice serve to accomplish His eternal purpose. More specifically, the biblical pattern finds God's hardening of men and nations providing the instrument for the fruition of His mercy. In other words, *hardening serves the goal of mercy* (9:22-23, ref. also 11:25-32). Paul introduced this principle to the context by drawing upon the Exodus event, and he did so for the ultimate purpose of explaining the significance and role of Israel's current plight, namely the nation's hardness in unbelief. His point was that, like Pharaoh before them, unbelieving Israel now stood as a vessel of wrath through whom God's mercy would come upon vessels of mercy. Far from overturning God's promise of salvation, Israel's opposition served the fulfillment of the promise; according to His oath to Abraham, all the families of the earth were indeed being blessed through his seed (Genesis 12:1-3, 28:10-14). Thus Paul declared that God carried along vessels of wrath in order that the glory of His saving mercy should come to vessels of mercy.

In the Exodus episode Israel had been God's vessel of mercy, but the Jewish nation had now become a vessel of wrath; it opposed the fulfillment of God's promise, just as Pharaoh had done before. God's election and calling had found their ultimate point of reference in Christ – who is the true Israel – and the result was that, through Him, it was being manifested that “not all Israel is Israel.” Mercy still depends on God's sovereign choice as the outworking of His promise to Abraham, but it now is grounded in the person and work of Christ, who is the Seed to whom the promise had ultimate reference.

Accordingly, Paul went on to delineate vessels of mercy as being those “*whom God called [in Christ], not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles*” (9:23-24). A new Christological principle now defines the objects of mercy and blessing. It is no longer physical connection to Abraham, but spiritual connection to him through His singular Seed. For this reason, the matter of Jew/Gentile distinction plays no role in who is a vessel of mercy. A new reality had come in Christ, and yet it was not new in the sense that it was previously unknown or undeclared. What was being manifested in the wake of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension had been predicted by the prophets for centuries. And they had predicted it precisely because God had *purposed* it. Israel's national rejection and opposition were according to God's plan, for He had determined that it would be through that hostility that He would both save a remnant of Jews and also bring the gospel to the Gentile peoples. By design, *Jewish hardness was to serve the goal of saving mercy toward the Gentiles and a remnant of Israel*. This had always been God's plan, and Paul turned to the Old Testament prophets to prove it.

Paul's substantiation consists of four prophetic contexts; two from Hosea and two from his contemporary, Isaiah. The latter two clearly apply to God's salvation of a Jewish remnant, and most scholars agree that the Hosea passages were intended to support Paul's affirmation of God's purpose to call the Gentiles. That understanding is supported by both the language and flow of Paul's argument, and is therefore adopted here.

- a. The first thing to observe about the Hosea citation is that Paul conjoined two distinct passages. One occurs in the first chapter of Hosea's prophecy (1:10), and the other in the second chapter (2:23).

“As He says also in Hosea, ‘I will call those who were not My people, “My people,” and her who was not beloved, “beloved.” And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, “You are not My people,” there they shall be called sons of the living God’” (9:25-26). Though these citations are drawn from different chapters and cited in reverse order, Paul could properly join them together in this way because they are a part of the same larger context.

- Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah, and his prophetic ministry spanned a four-decade period framing the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel (c. 753-710 B.C.). His prophecy appropriately begins with God’s proclamation of His intention to destroy the northern kingdom; His compassion for Israel had come to an end (1:1-6). The ten tribes had rebelled against Yahweh from the time of their separation from Judah, and for 200 years their kings had led them further into apostasy. Israel, like Hosea’s wife Gomer, had become a “wife of harlotry” who had born through the centuries “children of harlotry.” Now at last the time had come for Him to reject this unfaithful wife and her children; Hosea was to declare that Israel was no longer Yahweh’s people (1:8-9).
- At the same time, God revealed through Hosea His intention to withhold judgment from Judah and deliver them from the Assyrians (though they would later undergo their own destruction and captivity). His compassion for Israel had ended, but He would continue to have compassion on the house of Judah (1:7), and would deliver them by His own angel in the day of Assyria’s approach to Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:9-19:37).
- God had pronounced His rejection of Israel (“not My people”) and promised their desolation (“no compassion”). And yet His compassion would one day be renewed; in a manner that conspicuously draws upon the Abrahamic blessing, God declared that in the day of His compassion the sons of Israel would be like the sand of the sea (cf. Genesis 22:15-19). Those who had been declared “not My people” would become “sons of the living God” (1:10-11). *This is the first passage Paul drew from.*
- God was about to punish Israel with judgment and captivity (2:1-13), and yet He would not give her up entirely (ref. 11:1-11). At the appointed time He promised to “*allure her and speak kindly to her.*” He would restore His harlotrous wife Israel with the result that He would be the sole object of her marital devotion; He would be “Ishi” to her (2:14-17). In that day Yahweh, the devoted husband, would betroth Israel to Himself “*in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion and faithfulness*” (2:19-20). He would sow her back into His own sanctuary-land and cause the land to yield up its abundance for His beloved wife (2:21-22). Thus the one who had been designated “no compassion” and “not My people” would again receive compassion and it would be said of her, “You are My people” (2:23). *This is the second of Paul’s quotations.*

Given the historical and prophetic context for these two citations from Hosea, the question immediately arises as to the reason for Paul's use of them in this Romans context. As previously noted, it appears – and many scholars agree – that he was employing them in support of his contention in the preceding verse that the Gentiles are also vessels of divine mercy. But if this is the case, how was he taking a prophetic context addressing the future restoration of the ten tribes of *Israel* and their reunification with Judah and using it in reference to the salvation of the *Gentiles*? This is an interpretive problem that is openly recognized, and different scholars have sought to answer it in different ways.

In general, there are six ways it can be approached:

The *first* is the conclusion that these passages apply to the elect *Jews* of 9:24 rather than elect Gentiles. This approach is the most convenient, but difficult to support from the context and the connection between 9:24 and 9:25-26.

The *second* provides another easy answer, though the least acceptable one. That is that Paul was simply *misusing* these citations. Possibly he misunderstood them, but he was nonetheless taking Hosea's words completely out of context and reading a new meaning into them. Two objections to this conclusion are apparent. The first is that it argues against the inspiration of the Romans epistle, or at the very least the inspiration of this passage. For it is impossible that Paul could misuse the Scripture under the leading of the Holy Spirit. The second objection is that it would equally indict Peter, for he uses the same context of Hosea in a manner that also implicates the Gentiles (cf. 1 Peter 2:10).

The *third* possibility is that Paul was simply referring to Hosea by way of general correspondence or analogy. He fully understood the meaning of these Old Testament passages in context, and he was using them only in a comparative sense. In other words, just as God promised the ten tribes of Israel that He would one day restore and regather them to Himself, so the same principle also applies to the present recovery and ingathering of the Gentiles. Charles Hodge held this view, and expressed it as follows: “A *general truth, stated in reference to a particular class of persons, is to be considered as intended to apply to all those whose character and circumstances are the same, though the form or words of the original enunciation may not be applicable to all embraced within the scope of the general sentiment.*” (commentary on the Epistle to the Romans)

This interpretation also raises certain questions. Perhaps the most obvious is that there are many Old Testament passages that speak directly to the conversion of the Gentiles. That being the case, why would Paul choose to draw from a context that he had to employ in an indirect, non-contextual way? *Why not use a passage by which he could demonstrate literal, explicit fulfillment rather than resorting to biblical analogy to prove his point?* This is not to imply that the New Testament writers never made analogical references to the Old Testament, but in this instance there does not seem to be a compelling reason for Paul to do so.

A *fourth* interpretation begins with the proper contextual understanding that the Hosea passages are concerned with the eventual recovery of the northern kingdom of Israel after its destruction and subjugation by Assyria. It further recognizes the historical truth that these Israelite tribes were eventually assimilated into Gentile people groups as a result of Assyria's practice of resettling into foreign lands the various nations it conquered (cf. 2 Kings 17:5-7, 22-24, 18:9-12). It was this resettlement that gave rise to the Samaritans who were so despised by the Jews of Jesus' day because of their ethnic "uncleanness." It is argued that, as the northern tribes of Israel intermarried with Gentiles, they were effectively transformed into a quasi-Gentile entity, and for this reason the fulfillment of the Hosea prophecy is being realized in history in the salvation of the Gentiles.

The *fifth* view has been promoted by Calvin and others. It contends that Paul understood the restoration of Israel, and especially the accompanying reconciliation of the houses of Israel and Judah, as being fulfilled in the Church. In some formulations of Reformed theology, Old Testament Israel is essentially the same entity as the New Testament Church, with the primary difference being the age each inhabits. Both equally constitute the covenant people of God. As a result, the prophecies pertaining to Israel's future salvation have found their fulfillment in the Church as the present form of God's covenant people. And if they are fulfilled in the Church, they are also fulfilled in the salvation of Gentiles.

The *last* interpretive option to be considered is a variation of the preceding one. It holds that Paul viewed the fulfillment of the promise to reconcile the two houses of Israel as implicating the *attendant* salvation of the Gentiles. In other words, it does not equate Jewish Israel and the Church as the previous view does, but instead it sees the formation of the New Covenant people of God as including the *ingrafting* of the Gentiles along with the reconciliation of an elect remnant from Israel and Judah. Only in this sense can it be said that God's promise to Israel is fulfilled in the New Testament Church. This view seems best, first because it is consistent with Paul's later teaching in this context (ref. esp. 11:1-26), but also because of its agreement with the Old Testament witness.

- David achieved the goal of establishing the Israelite kingdom promised to Abraham, and an important aspect of that accomplishment was David's unification of the twelve tribes of Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-3). Consistent with the typological role of this kingdom, the fulfilled kingdom of David's Son would also be marked by such reconciliation (even as the fracturing of Israel marked the impending end of David's kingdom). *This is the larger context of the Hosea passage, which finds its focal point in the coming of the Davidic King* (ref. chaps. 1-3; esp. 1:11, 3:5; also Jeremiah 30-33).
- But as the coming of David's Son would bring the reunification of Israel, so also it would bring the ingathering of the Gentiles. This is a core truth in Isaiah's prophecy (ref. chaps. 9-12, 19, 43-49, 52, 59-60, 66; also cf. Daniel 7:1-14; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 5:1-5; Zechariah 9:9-12).

Thus Paul's interpretation of Hosea's words is grounded in the prophetic promise of the coming and reign of the Davidic King. His coming is the basis for the promise in Hosea: *Israel was to be recovered and reunited with Judah in the context of their being brought together under one head* (1:10-11). So also His coming would bring the ingathering of the Gentiles: *the nations would resort to the root of Jesse; He would lift up a standard for the nations, and assemble the banished ones of Israel and the dispersed of Judah* (Isaiah 11:10-12). In this way unified Israel would become a third party with the Gentiles (Isaiah 19:19-25).

Paul knew the promise that the coming kingdom was to be marked by the reconciliation and reunification of the houses of Israel. He knew that the Davidic King would accomplish this, for He would unify them *in Himself*. But Paul also knew that He would not merely gather God's chosen from Israel and Judah; He would stand as the rallying point for the Gentile peoples. Thus he declared that, as had been the case with David and the twelve tribes of Israel, those who previously opposed one another were now being made into "one new man" by David's royal Son as He "broke down the barrier of the dividing wall" (ref. Ephesians 2:8-3:10).

Hosea had promised that Israel – declared to be "*not My people*" by God – was to again be called "*My people*." She had been forsaken because of the disobedience of her unbelief, and she would be restored through the vindication of righteousness (Hosea 2:19-20). The one who had been cut off from compassion and divine devotion would again be called "*beloved*," and so be brought everlastingly into the grace of God's covenant. For those who are God's beloved – those who are His people – are those who are "*sons of the living God*."

But what was true of Israel was also true of the Gentiles. The reason is that God's promise to Israel would be fulfilled with the coming of the Davidic King. Just as Israel had been rejected because of disobedience and consigned to carry the designations, "not My people" and "not beloved," so also the Gentiles had existed through the ages "without hope and without God in the world." They, too, stood rejected and condemned in unbelief. But the same reality of fulfillment that would find God betrothing harlotrous Israel to Himself in righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, and compassion would find Him including in that betrothal the wayward and disobedient nations of the earth. Those who had been hopeless in their alienation would be gathered and taken by the Lamb to be His beloved Bride, and in that way they would be forever rendered "sons of the living God."

"But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity...that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father." (Ephesians 2:13-18)