

Moses and Pharaoh

Romans 9:14-18

We are in the 9th chapter of Romans again today. Recall last time we found election to be a *biblical* doctrine, a *humbling* doctrine, a *glorious* doctrine, and a *gladdening* doctrine. It is the great news of sovereign grace. God is exalted in man's dependence.

Paul's next paragraph displays **two very forceful pictures of God's power** – Moses and Pharaoh. God is free to save as many as he pleases – nothing hinders him. And God is free to leave as many as he pleases to their sins and judgment.

Paul is answering objections. And to do that he has us stand with Moses to behold the Lord's glory in Exodus 34, and then to stand with Pharaoh in his court in Egypt, being hardened clay in the hand of the Potter.

In both, God is personally sovereign. He is not in need of man. He has the right and freedom to do as he pleases. He does according to His will in the heavens above and in the earth beneath. He may show love and grace compassionately to thousands. AND, He is altogether a just and holy God who will, who must punish sin as he sees fit.

Salvation is out of our hands! It is not whosoever *in us*, but whosoever *in God!* What a good thing! For most people do not understand a need to be saved. Many people believe they can save themselves! And still others despair of salvation and just accept this abnormal life as normal.

So, not as man wills but as God wills. Not so much ‘whosoever will’ – because none will! Let me say it again, “None will!” on their own. But here is the glory – God’s *will* comes to the rescue. Paul clearly says it is not of him who wills or runs!

Nor does this erase man’s will. When men are saved by the power of God, their will is renewed and they must run to Jesus! Free will is a slave, said Luther. But God makes the hardest sinner willing and free.

What kind of a God do you trust? “A god of your own fancy, who hardens nobody, condemns nobody, pities nobody.” So Luther said to Erasmus.

It is the Lord who has the keys of life and death, not man; he opens and no man shuts, he shuts and no man opens.

“The efficient cause of man’s salvation is not in his independence, nor in his being the master of his destiny; it is not in his own will or in the vigor of his desires concerning salvation; but it is in the good will of God.” (paraphrased from Plumer)

There is nothing here to discourage our coming to the Lord. But if we come, it is because the Father draws us to Himself and His Son.

Paul now flips the coin in verses 17-18 to the other side - ***reprobation***.

Remember, Paul has not been talking about how Jews believed, but why the Jews did not believe! They did not believe in Christ Jesus. How can that be? They did not see what Abraham saw. They were more on the side of rejected Esau than elected Jacob. They have not found mercy with Moses, but like Pharaoh are hardened by God for their sins!

Look at the subsequent language – they have become like Sodom and Gomorrah, so few rescued! They stumbled over faith in the Rock of offense. Few have believed the report of Jesus from the OT. God gave them a spirit of stupor, has darkened their eyes, and bent them over forever.

Verse 18 – He hardens whomsoever He desires!

Here is Pharaoh. A vivid example of the mighty hand of God, who was shown without any possible doubt the wonders of the true God over the idols of Egypt, the land of death. With a miraculous and uplifted hand, the “I AM” showed over and over and over and over his might, control, presence with his people and opposition to his foes. He alone humbled that land with its leader. He put them all into the sand and the sea!

And they repented, right? NO!

Well so it is with the Jews of Paul’s day. The same miraculous, uplifted hand of the “I AM” come in the flesh, wrapped in lowly humility, showed over and over and over and over again His mighty, gracious control over all; not come in judgement but mercy, to lift high the cross, for all to see and be healed.

But how did they respond to the miracles, the wonders, his resurrection, the simple gospel of eternal life!? They plugged their ears, and shut their eyes, and cried out, “He has a devil!!” And they sought to snuff out the name of Jesus, by the cross and sealed tomb, and by outlawing his disciples and imprisoning and killing them!

See several things in this first century portrait:

First God is not in the business of saving every soul in this world. God rejects sinners, Jews and Gentiles, and leaves them in their evil disobedience. While he calls all to be saved, He opposes his enemies and is against them. He is not standing off to the side doing nothing regarding the wicked. God is not neutral toward sinners. He hardened his enemy, He hardened Pharaoh in his sins; especially the sin of blind unbelief! God is not passive in this. He rejected Cain, he cursed Canaan the son of Noah, he expelled Ishmael the son of bondage, and hated Esau before he was born or did anything good or evil.

God is said not only to hate but to harden souls in their ways. He curses and he blinds. He gives them over to a mind that is stupefied, a heart that is numb and cold, a life that is dreadful.

This is not only in the OT. Jesus is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. He spoke in parables that people will fail to understand because they refuse to obey. In his wonders, he heals a blind man in John 9 so those who see might be made blind as well as the blind made to see!

God still gives over and abandons people to their sins, Romans 1. He appoints people to disobedience, 1 Pet. 2.8. He designates some for condemnation, Jude 4. He commands a spirit of delusion, 2 Thess. 2:11.

This is the clay the Potter has to work with! And as Romans 9 says, the Lord may, the Lord does willingly, *with a will*, demonstrate his just wrath and make his holy power known – as in Pharaoh. He endures with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction!

We all need to take this seriously! God is not in the business of saving everyone. Not everyone in this world is going to heaven. There are many in our neighborhoods, our families, our workplaces, in this world, who are CERTAINLY going to hell!

And God is ordering this – He is the sovereign conductor on this train! Now is he doing this in a way to drag people along – who really don't want to live in sin, who don't want to be godless, but deep down really, really, really want to love God? Really, really want to be free from sin as sin?

That is the issue, isn't it? It is not a bad God leading good people to a bad place where they don't belong. It is a loving but just God leading children of the wicked one to where the devil belongs. And this God is telling all on this train to get off! Flee from your sins! Turn from hell! He blows the whistle of warning! His voice comes over the PA system – "here is my Son – he can, he will save you, if you would come to him!" He protests – "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked!" Oh that all would have such a heart to believe and love and obey!

But they do not; they will not! We love our sin, we love our unbelief; we mock the Bible and its message; and our thoughts, our mouths, our eyes and ears, our hands and feet betray who and what we are apart from the Gospel.

Now, all of this is part of God's purpose, his plan, his secret will, his decree. Everything you see coming to pass, all that is arises first from the mind and will of our Sovereign God. Predestination comes all from God. Reprobation comes all from God. Because all things come from God!

But the point to be taken here is God is not saving everyone. He is leaving many, who now are in the broad way to destruction to themselves! They have closed their ears to Him and His salvation. “The preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”

Now is God unfair to so plan things out this way? Well, let me give you this helpful quote from Horatius Bonar. “Whatever is right for God to do, it is right for him to decree.” (Repeat.) If God’s casting sinners into hell is not wrong or unjust, then his purposing to do so from eternity cannot be wrong or unjust.

God always does what is fitting to Himself; He never transgresses against Himself. And He is righteous and perfect. But we want him to grade on a curve! And He won’t! But He can and will save the worst sinners, not in a way of works, but of free grace.

RC Sproul brings this out when he wrote: “To rescue a sinner from His damnation is a wonderful thing. But to punish unrighteousness justly is also good.” He goes on to say: “God from the beginning determined to manifest both grace and justice – never injustice – by rescuing some (that’s grace) and passing over others (that’s justice). No one gets injustice [from Him].”

The point of election is a positive one. That God can save all kinds of sinners, since salvation is what He does and not what we do.

Reprobation is the fearful but true flip side. If God chooses some, he hasn’t chosen others. “Saving election and sovereign reprobation are mutually required” (John Calvin). “Unless God predestines both salvation and damnation, He predestines neither.” (Richard Phillips)

God does not merely pass over the reprobate as though he never touches them, never is in contact with them, as though they judge themselves and cast themselves into hell. He judges them for their sin, then prepares them for what their sins deserve.

John Calvin summarizes this point: “The **ground** of the discrimination that exists among men is the sovereign will of God and that alone; but the ground of **damnation** to which the reprobate are consigned is sin and sin **alone**.⁷”

Calvinism has held men responsible and culpable, guilty and blameworthy, for the wide and harsh reality of misery and sorrow in this world. People would blame God. But the blame is at our door.

Our world is truly the world of the Bible.

Look around you. On the one hand we have many beautiful, majestic, awesome, healthful and delightful realities. They abound around us daily. The immeasurable goodness of God can be seen on every hand. A whisper of heaven, the sound of the silver bells of eternity is in the skies and our souls – in spite of all to the contrary.

But on the other hand, what misery, perversion, evil, mindless mayhem and senseless slaughter is seen just as widely! Children come forth from the womb diseased, with cancer, addicted to drugs, damaged by alcohol. That is if they make it safely out of the womb. More babies died last year from abortion than from Covid.

So man responds to all this, and goes back and forth between total pessimism and total optimism; between a god who is blind and harsh, and a god who is only sugary and nice.

But we cannot scatter flowers on the grave and romanticize death, or make sin to be only weakness, or call the darkness of drowning in an ocean of tears God's best possible world. It is not. This is delusion. This is drivel, say the Bavinck.

The decree of election and reprobation steps in, not as a full resolution to every question in our minds, but at the same time a true and real solution for our hearts and lives.

This God of sovereignty, who saves some but not all and who hardens some but not others, is both an almighty and righteous holy God, transcendent; and the everlasting, mercy-filled Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came into this fallen world, went about doing good and healing all, before laying himself down to the cruelest death, to save sinners and to bring in a new, resurrected world. A world without sin, without Satan, without evil and truly good through and through, where God's glory reigns supremely, suffusing every atom!

Romans 9-11 ends with these striking words: "God has shut up all in obstinate disobedience that He might have mercy on all."

All deserve Hell; all may come to Heaven by the power of His mercy. He shows mercy to whom He shows mercy; and whom He wills He hardens.

There is not injustice with God, is there. And yet it still doesn't seem fair. That is what Paul takes up in the next paragraph, and our next sermon.