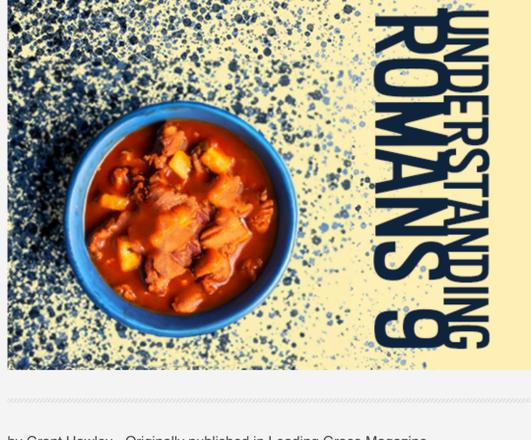


UNDERSTANDING ROMANS 9



by Grant Hawley - Originally published in Leading Grace Magazine

INTRODUCTION

There are a lot of passages in Scripture that people intentionally avoid. Usually it is because they have an idea about what it says, and they don't like that idea. Romans 9 is one of those passages for many, and there are a lot of jokes at the expense of non-Calvinists because of it. Calvinists use it as a proof text for the idea that God unconditionally predestined some to salvation and some also use it to suggest that the unelect are predestined to damnation. It says things like, "He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens," and that is assumed to mean that God chooses individuals for each from eternity past and without conditions.

I don't expect this article to solve the debate about Romans 9, or even to persuade those who are committed to Calvinism. That isn't the point of this article. What I'm hoping to accomplish is to help those who say, "I'm not sure I understand Romans 9, and I haven't wanted to spend a lot of time there" to have a foundation to study the passage without fear. It's an amazing passage that fiercely defends the righteousness of God, and it's a shame that so many are missing out on it.

A BIT ABOUT INTERPRETATION

One paradox of Bible interpretation is that one needs to understand the whole book before he can understand the individual passages, and he needs to understand the individual passages before he can understand the whole book. The way we address this is something called the "hermeneutical spiral," which is to say we go back and forth between reading the whole book and digging into the individual passage we hope to understand. In this way, we can get a good understanding of individual passages in context as we gain a better-defined big picture of the book.

CONTEXT AND THEMES

A few years ago, I taught through Romans in the church I serve as pastor, and one of the most important things I discovered through the hermeneutical spiral process is the particular aspect of wrath and judgment that Paul uses as a theme in the book. He sets the definition in Romans 1 when he writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" followed by "Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness" and "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions" (Rom 1:18, 24, 26). So, the aspect of God's wrath Paul calls to mind is that as a response to their "suppress[ing] the truth in unrighteousness," God gives people over to their sinful desires.

This theme continues in Romans (4:12; 5:9; 9:22), but it isn't just with the term "wrath" it also shows itself in other terms of judgment, such as "death/die/died" (5:21; 6:16, 23; 7:5, 9, 10, 13; 8:6, 13) "condemnation" (5:16, 18; 8:1), and, more explicitly, "hardens" (9:18). The basic idea is that God's righteous judgment is shown in that he gives people over to sinful passions/desires in response to their rejection of Him. Paul uses Pharaoh as an example of this in Rom 9:17, and this follows what we see in Pharaoh's story. Pharaoh suppressed the truth in unrighteousness (first, by exalting himself to divinity, then by keeping God's people enslaved, then again in Exod 5:2, 6-9; 8:15, 32), so the LORD hardened his heart in judgment.

Another interesting thing about the book of Romans is that Romans 9 actually picks up a discussion that began in 3:1-7. After demonstrating that the Jews outside of Christ are just as much under God's condemnation as the Gentiles (Romans 2), Paul asks, "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of the circumcision? Much in every way!" (3:1-2a), but he only lists one advantage in that context: "Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God" (3:2b). He doesn't get to the rest of the advantages until Rom 9:4-5.

There are two other questions posed in Rom 3:1-7 that aren't answered until Romans 9-11. The first is, "For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?" (3:3). The question here is asking if God will still keep His promises to Israel if some don't believe. Paul answers "Yes!" which is most clearly seen in Rom 11:26a, "And so all Israel will be saved" and 11:29, "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." God hasn't forgotten His love for or His promises to the Jews.

The next question from Romans 3:1-7 that is answered in Romans 9 is: "But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner?" (Rom 3:5-7). In other words, if God gives people (and, in this case, nations) over to sinful desires as part of righteous judgment, why does God still find fault with those whom He has given over to sinful desires? Who could resist His will? This argument is addressed in Romans 9:19-29. So, Romans 9 (and 10 and 11) is about defending God's righteousness in regard to His dealings with Israel.

THE SUBJECT OF ROMANS 9

The primary subject of Romans 9 is nations, not individuals, and especially God's dealings with Israel versus His dealings with the Gentiles. In the example of "JACOB I HAVE LOVED, BUT ESAU I HAVE HATED" (Rom 9:13), the nations of Israel and Edom are in view. We know this because, in Rom 9:12, Paul recalls Gen 25:23: "And the LORD said to her [Rebekah]: 'Two nations are in your womb; Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.'" Esau, the individual, never served Jacob. In fact, it was the opposite (Gen 32:4), yet the fate of these nations was set.

The reason so many can't see this is because for more than a thousand years, the church, for all intents and purposes, universally rejected the idea that God would fulfill His promises to Israel. Instead, they believed that God had rejected Israel and instead will fulfill His promises allegorically in the Church. With that basic foundation missing, Romans 9 can't be understood literally. To try to make sense of it, people read into Romans 9 the idea of God choosing individuals for salvation and damnation, but that idea isn't there unless we put it there.

GOD AND HIS CHOSEN NATION

What is there is a look at the advantages the Jews have as God's chosen nation, a defense of God's righteousness relative to His keeping His promises to Israel, and a defense of the righteousness of God's judgment.

Romans 9 teaches us that God hardens some people and shows mercy to others. Calvinism says that God does this as a sovereign decree without consideration of any response or activity on the part of human beings. This Calvinistic doctrine is called Unconditional Election, and it forms the U of the TULIP acronym. But Paul tells us explicitly why God chooses to show mercy on some and harden others right here in this section of Romans.

Calvinism also teaches that all human beings are already hardened from birth to the point that they cannot respond to the gospel by believing unless they are first regenerated (regeneration is when people receive eternal life and the Holy Spirit comes to indwell the person). This doctrine is called Total Depravity (or, better, Total Inability) and it is the T of the TULIP acronym. Scripture teaches that regeneration comes as a result of faith, not the other way around (Eph 1:13; 2:5, 8), but that's another article for another day. What we discuss in this article is when and why this hardening occurs.

WHY DOES GOD HARDEN SOME AND SHOW OTHERS MERCY?

Is God's choice to show mercy and harden a mystery hidden in the mind of God, or is it something He has revealed in His Word?

Before we answer this question, we need to understand why it is that some think that God's decision is a mystery. The verses which, out of context, can seem to suggest this are Rom 9:10-13, which says:

“ **And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "THE OLDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER." As it is written, "JACOB I HAVE LOVED, BUT ESAU I HAVE HATED."**

This is confusing for many because they are missing one of the main themes of Romans 9, namely, that it looks at the advantages of the Jews in God's program for the ages. As mentioned above, when Paul quotes Gen 25:23 in Rom 9:12, he is referring to nations ("two nations are in your womb"), not individuals, just as Moses was, and as God was when He first said it. Thus, "the purpose of God according to election" (Rom 9:11) has to do with God's choice of Israel to be His representative nation. We see the same thing when Paul writes of Israel, "Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers" (Rom 11:28). If election in this passage (Romans 9-11) had to do with individuals being chosen from eternity past to be regenerated and then believe the gospel, how could those who are beloved concerning election be enemies concerning the gospel? This only makes sense if election is not about believing the gospel.

When we understand that Israel's purpose as a nation is in view when unconditional election is concerned in Romans 9, then nothing in the context suggests that God's decision to show mercy on some and harden others is a mystery.

One major theme in Romans 9-11 is that, other than a remnant, God has hardened Israel for the time being (see especially Rom 11:7-10, 25). Israel has been pursuing righteousness, but instead they were hardened. Paul said, "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Rom 9:16). Paul also writes:

“ **"For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOMEVER I WILL HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOMEVER I WILL HAVE COMPASSION." (...) Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens." (Rom 9:15, 18)**

Is God unjust? Is the answer simply that God gets to choose whom He will have mercy on and whom He will harden because He's God and we can't say anything about it because we are His creatures? It is true that God can do what He likes with His creation (Rom 9:20). We can't argue with God because He makes the rules. But thankfully, it is also true that God is truly just, and he doesn't do this arbitrarily.

Knowing God's righteous character, Paul asks the question we all have, why did God harden Israel when they were pursuing righteousness and show mercy on the Gentiles who didn't pursue righteousness at all? Romans 9:30-10:4 reads:

“ **What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as [if] it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STUMBLING STONE AND ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND WHOEVER BELIEVES ON HIM WILL NOT BE PUT TO SHAME." Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**

God doesn't take into account how hard you run or will to do righteousness because, as Paul established back in Rom 1:18-3:20, no one meets God's righteous standard no matter how hard they try. We all fall short. In fact, the law does nothing but to condemn mankind. What He does take into account is how we respond to Jesus. God offers His righteousness as a free gift to anyone who believes in Jesus, and we can stumble at that stumbling stone, or we can believe and not be put to shame. By and large, Israel in Paul's day stumbled. They wanted their own righteousness instead of God's because in all their zeal, they still didn't know any better.

Thus, God hardens hearts in response to their response to Jesus Christ. It isn't done in eternity past, or even from birth, but only as a response to intentional rejection. This is exactly what we would expect from Paul's discussion about wrath from chapter 1:

“ **For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom 1:18-21)**

God's wrath follows man's rejection of His righteousness.

This also matches what we see in the Gospels. From Matthew 4-12, Jesus is preaching to Israel that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and doing miracles to prove His message, but it isn't until the religious leaders attribute the miracles Jesus does to Beelzebub that Jesus begins to teach in parables, hiding the truth from those who were unwilling to receive it (Matt 13:10-11). Again, hardening comes after rejection.

CONCLUSION

Romans 9 is part of a strong defense of God's righteousness. God is just, and not only because He gets to make the rules. He's just because He always does the right thing. He always keeps His promises, and will be faithful to keep all the promises He made to Israel. And He does not deal out wrath/hardening arbitrarily, but in accordance with a clear, just, and revealed standard. What's even more is that He is incredibly patient before hardening anyone, as He says, "ALL DAY LONG I HAVE STRETCHED OUT MY HANDS TO A DISOBEDIENT AND CONTRARY PEOPLE" (Rom 10:21, quoting Isa 65:2). Even more so, He has sent His Son Jesus to die for our sins and rise from the dead so that He can give righteousness freely to anyone who is willing to take it freely.

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