

God's Hardening Of Men's Hearts - Sovereign Or Judicial?

by Michael Jeshurun

The truth of reprobation has always been a thorny subject for Christians. Even those who deem themselves Calvinists and believers in the absolute sovereignty of God shy away from this truth which God has chosen to reveal in the Scriptures. And sadly, those who should know better for the most part 'explain it away' in such a manner that it does not stir up any controversy or awe, and neither raises the question which the Apostle anticipated; i.e. "WHY DOTH HE YET FIND FAULT? For who hath resisted HIS WILL"? [Romans 9:19]

The Bible speaks of men hardening their hearts against God! And this hardening is spoken of as both Judicial and Sovereign.

Judicial hardening is God hardening the hearts of men because they have rejected Him and His Truth, while Sovereign hardening, like election finds its cause only in the good pleasure of Him who doeth all things after the counsel of His own will! Or as the Master said, "Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in Thy sight"! [Matt 11:26]

While the average Calvinist or Reformed preacher is only too happy to expound and preach profound sermons on Judicial hardening, he is for the most part silent on Sovereign hardening and Sovereign reprobation! And the reason is not too far to seek. Judicial hardening raises no eyebrows nor offends the nominal 'Christian' who comes Sunday after Sunday to warm the pew and pay his tithes and offerings to keep the 'ministry' running; while sermons on Sovereign hardening, or the fact that God does not love EVERYBODY, or that CHRISTMAS IS PAGAN and the like would soon clear his Church and leave him without a 'ministry'!

But thanks be to God for those preachers who can say with the Apostle - "I have not shunned to declare unto you ALL THE COUNSEL OF GOD"! [Acts 20:27]

Let us consider God's SOVEREIGN HARDENING as it is revealed in Romans 9.

"Therefore hath HE mercy on whom HE will have mercy, and whom HE will HE hardeneth"! [Romans 9:18]

This passage in Romans 9 is the clearest of all! The whole chapter is concerned with God's sovereignty as it relates to Israel. First God showed His sovereignty in connection with Abraham's seed [vs 7] in passing by Ishmael and calling Isaac. Second God showed His sovereignty in connection with Isaac's sons [vs 10-13] in loving Jacob and hating Esau. Third the question is raised: "Is there unrighteousness with God"? [vs 14] Is it not unjust for God to

show 'PARTIALITY'? The answer is-certainly not, or "God forbid" - God CANNOT deal unjustly!

But He can and does bestow His favor on whom He pleases, for He is sovereign, saying- "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" etc [vs15]. Fourth, in vs 18, this solemn truth is pressed one step further: not only does God have mercy on whom He will, but "WHOM HE WILL HE HARDENETH", and it FROM THIS POINT ONWARDS TO THE END OF THE CHAPTER that most preachers are radically unsound!

What even the majority of those who deem themselves 'Calvinists' say concerning this is - "What is in view here is 'Judicial hardening' i.e. a forsaking by God, because these subjects of His judicial hardening first forsook Him, rejected His truth etc. In support of their contention, appeal is made to such scriptures as Romans 1:19-26 - 'God gave them up' i.e. "those, who when they knew God, glorified Him not as God" [vs 21]. Also 2Thes 2:10-12 is quoted to buttress their view. That these last two quoted passages refer to judicial 'hardening' we will allow, though the word 'harden' occurs in neither of them. But our objection is that neither of them are in anywise relevant to the point raised in Romans 9:18, which to our mind has no reference at all to 'judicial hardening'!

Clearly in Romans 9:18 the Apostle is not speaking of God hardening those who had first turned their backs on His truth, but instead, is insisting that in 'hardening' (as much as in showing mercy) God is exercising His own sovereignty! Note, beloved, the precise wording of verse 18, (so different to man's glosses upon it) - "Therefore hath He mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will (not all who have rejected His truth) He hardeneth"! the 'therefore' which begins verse 18, in our judgment points back, particularly to verse 17 where Pharaoh is mentioned as a sample case of God's sovereignty in "hardening whom He wills."

The case of Pharaoh is clear enough though man has done his best to hide the truth. True, we read both of Pharaoh hardening his own heart, and also of God hardening his heart. But WHICH IS MENTIONED FIRST? See Exodus 4:21 where the word occurs for the first time in connection with Pharaoh. Man always reverses God's order. PHARAOH HARDENED HIS HEART BECAUSE GOD HAD FIRST HARDENED IT, AND NOT VICE VERSA AS WE ARE ASKED TO BELIEVE!

The passage in Romans 9:18 of God's sovereign 'hardening' of sinner's hearts in contradiction to judicial hardening (because of truth rejected) - is not alone! We quote now one other passage in the New Testament, i.e. John 12:37-40 - "But though He had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they COULD NOT BELIEVE, (why?) because that Esaias said again, HE HATH BLINDED their eyes, and hardened their heart; (why? Most preachers say because they refused to believe on

Christ etc. but how different the solemn Word of God which follows) THAT THEY SHOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES, NOR UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED, AND I SHOULD HEAL THEM”!

Now beloved it is just a question of whether or not we will “believe” what God has told us in His Word! IT IS NOT A MATTER OF PROLONGED SEARCHING OR PROFOUND STUDY, BUT CHILDLIKENESS THAT IS NEEDED!

Returning now to Romans 9:19, another difficulty or objection is now faced: “Thou wilt say then unto me, then why doth He yet FIND FAULT”?! Now beloved, we ask you, what do, or what can, these words mean? Answer yourself before you read ours. Can the force of the Apostle’s question be any other than this: “If it is true that God has “mercy” on whom He wills, and ALSO “hardens” whom He wills, then we are no more than PUPPETS and in such a case it is UNJUST for God to find fault with His helpless creatures! Such, we take is the real force of the objection.

Note the “THEN” used as an inference or a consequence drawn from what the Apostle has said in previous verses. And mark, beloved, that the APOSTLE READILY SAW THAT THE DOCTRINE HE HAD PRESENTED WOULD RAISE THIS VERY OBJECTION, and unless what we have written concerning ‘God’s sovereignty’ also raises the SAME OBJECTION, it proves that either we have not FAITHFULLY STATED the doctrine of Romans 9 or else human nature has CHANGED since Paul’s day!

Note further in verse 19, the SAME question is REPEATED, now in a slightly different form – REPEATED so that the Apostle’s meaning may not be misunderstood, i.e. “For who hath resisted His will”? Now mark particularly the last two words: “HIS WILL” It is a question of God’s will the Apostle is discussing, i.e. His sovereign ways, which confirms what we said concerning verses 17 and 18, i.e. it is NOT JUDICIAL HARDENING WHICH IS HERE IN VIEW, (that is hardening because of previous rejection of truth), but SOVEREIGN HARDENING, that is, for no other reason than that which inheres in the “will” of God!

Now how does the Apostle meet the objection raised (anticipatedly) in verse 19? Does he say the objection is pointless and groundless? Does he tell the objector that his inference is a false one, that his conclusion is unsound? Not at all. By no means. Instead he rebukes the objector for his impiety. He reminds the objector that he is merely a ‘man’, a creature – and that as such it is most impertinent and unseemly for him to ‘reply’ (to argue or reason) against God. Further he tells him that he is merely a thing that has been ‘formed’ – hence it is madness and blasphemy to rise up against the “Former” Himself.

Before passing to the next verses, we would call your attention to the last words of verse 20 – “why hast Thou made me THUS”? What can be its force in the light of the immediate context? Surely, why (like in the case of Pharaoh) hast Thou made me simply to “harden” me? Can it signify anything else, in the

light of the context?

Lastly in Romans 9:21-23 the Apostle furnishes a full and final reply to the objections named in verse 19. First, he asks, "Hath not the potter power" –a different word from that translated "power" in verse 22, where it can only signify His might; but here in verse 21, the "power" spoken of must refer to the CREATOR'S RIGHTS OR SOVEREIGN PREROGATIVES; that this is so appears from the fact that the same Greek word is employed in John 1:12 – "gave he "power" to becomes the sons of God' which as you probably know, means, the right or privilege to become the sons of God.

"Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor"? Certainly He has, because He is God the Creator! Does He EXERCISE this 'right'? Yes, as verse 17 clearly shows, "for this same purpose have I raised thee (Pharaoh) up" etc. Second the Apostle now tells us, why God acts thus – differently with different ones, having mercy on some and hardening others, making one vessel unto "honor" and another unto "dishonor." Notice, in verse 22 the Apostle first mentions "the vessels of wrath" before he refers in verse 23 to the "vessels of mercy"! Why is this? Because it is the "vessels of Wrath" who are the subjects of the objection in verse 19!

Notice also that in verse 22 the Apostle does not say that these vessels of Wrath were "FIT for destruction" but rather "FITTED to destruction" which in the light of the immediate context means SOVEREIGNLY ORDAINED to destruction by the Creator!

"(For the children being not yet born, NEITHER HAVING DONE ANY GOOD OR EVIL, THAT THE PURPOSE OF GOD ACCORDING TO ELECTION MIGHT STAND, NOT OF WORKS, BUT OF HIM THAT CALLETH;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but ESAU HAVE I HATED!" [Romans 9:11-13]

Let us assert in conclusion that the only reason that we know that God "loved" Jacob is because He looked at him 'in Christ' (the sole reason why He loves you, me or anyone else whom He calls and saves); and that He hated Esau before he was born, was not because of any evil acts or even evil nature, but because Esau SINNED "IN ADAM" and thus provoked God's holy wrath! It is lamentable how little the doctrines of 'imputation' and 'representation' are understood today even by eminent theologians!

[Paraphrased from A.W. Pink's letter to his friend and publisher I.C. Herendeen, July 21st 1918]
