

2. Having insisted upon God's unchanging covenant faithfulness in chapter eight, Paul was eager to remove the objection that could be raised with respect to His relationship with His Old Testament people Israel. Despite appearances, Israel's accursed state does not reflect the failure of God's word of promise, but rather is indicative of the fact that all Israel is not Israel. God has not reneged on His promise to the fathers and the nation of Israel; His covenant promise simply does not pertain to all the physical offspring of Abraham. God's sovereign choice, and not physical descent, determines those who are the heirs of the promise.

By making divine determination the sole criterion for the reception of the promise, Paul knew that he was opening himself up for further objections. For this reason, before continuing his main line of argumentation he stepped aside to address the specific issue of God's sovereignty in salvation. Once again he employed the instrument of diatribe to accomplish this, posing a series of rhetorical questions and then responding to them appropriately. With the insight that comes only from gospel ministry, Paul raised and addressed precisely the sorts of objections people in every generation put forth as they are faced with the issue of divine sovereignty. This makes this passage eminently practical.

- a. Paul began this discussion by raising the overarching objection to God's sovereignty in salvation, namely its implication for God's righteousness and justice. If it is true that the reception of the promise depends solely on God's choice and nothing in the individual, whether actual or foreseen, then can it not be inferred that there is unrighteousness with God? "*What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!*" (9:14).

This is perhaps the greatest argument raised against the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Essentially, the reasoning is that, if God does not take into consideration the person's own virtue – or at least his faith, then He is acting *unrighteously* in His election. The noun here rendered *injustice* has a broad range of meaning, denoting in general any lack of or deviation from what is *right*. This "rightness" implies an objective standard, and extends to both ethics and morality. In the Old Testament, "righteousness" as it refers to God is often associated with His covenant fidelity in relation to Israel. But this definition ultimately looks back to the righteousness that is God's own impeccable character. God's righteousness in His covenant dealings with Israel was simply one expression of His essential righteous character. God was faithful to Israel because He is faithful to Himself (cf. Deuteronomy 7:9-12; Isaiah 55:6-8; Malachi 3:1-7; 2 Timothy 2:13; etc.).

Given the larger emphasis on God's covenant integrity, it is possible that Paul was using the term in that sense, but the local context seems to focus more on the issue of *fairness* or *justice* rather than covenant faithfulness. In context, the issue is that, by choosing men independently of their own goodness or wickedness, God fails to regard matters that ought justly to be considered in His determination of whom He receives as His children. And His failure to do so renders Him guilty of unrighteousness or *injustice*, just as would be the case with a judge who fails to take into account important evidence before reaching his verdict.

Yet Paul regarded this conclusion as preposterous. Is injustice possible with God? *May it never be!* Paul could easily have left it at that, for God's own character is sufficient to refute the charge of injustice on His part, regardless of how a circumstance may appear. But he chose instead to show why God's sovereignty in salvation will not permit an accusation of unrighteousness. And the reason is bound up in the principle of *mercy*, which Paul interacts with from two distinct vantage points derived from two Old Testament citations (9:15, 17). These quotations are related historically, thematically, and theologically: both represent divine declarations drawn from the historical context of the Exodus, and both implicate God's election of the nation of Israel. Most importantly, Paul's commentary on them binds them together and shows the close relationship that exists between mercy and hardening in the larger purpose of God (9:16, 18).

- b. The first quotation is a divine proclamation to Moses: "*For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'*" (9:15). This citation is taken from Exodus 33 and an event that represents the pinnacle of God's self-disclosure to Israel.
- Immediately following God's ratification of His covenant with Israel at Sinai, the nation proceeded to violate the covenant by making an image of Yahweh (the golden calf). Moses had been on the mountain for forty days, and the people were anxious to move on toward Canaan. God had brought them to Sinai, and they knew that He would have to lead them into the promised land. But in the absence of Moses – who mediated God's presence and leadership – Israel needed another point of connection with Yahweh, and a physical image representing Him appeared to be the solution (Exodus 32:1-6).
 - God disclosed Israel's flagrant act of covenant breaking to Moses, and declared to him that He was going to destroy the nation He had chosen and build a new people through him. But Moses pled with God to remember and uphold His covenant promise to the patriarchs. The crucial importance of Moses' petition is that it reiterates a fundamental principle of God's dealings with men: *By preserving His chosen people – in spite of their sinfulness and solely because of His promise – Yahweh would glorify His name among the nations and show Himself to be a God who sovereignly keeps covenant and establishes His own apart from who they are and what they do.* When Moses' intercession is seen in this way, the reason for God's relenting and its significance become clear (32:7-14).
 - After interceding for Israel, Moses proceeded to descend Mount Sinai and confront the nation with its idolatry. In an act of powerful symbolism, he smashed the tablets of the covenant and called for those who were devoted to Yahweh to remove themselves from among the rebellious people. He then commanded the faithful to take their swords and slay the rebels in agreement with the terms of the covenant (32:15-29, cf. also 20:1-7).

- The next day Moses went before the Lord to again intercede for the nation. At that time God revealed to him that He would no longer “go up in the midst” of the people. They had broken His covenant, and He would not commune with them as formerly (cf. 24:1-8). From that point forward, Moses was to lead the people with the assistance of God’s angel (32:30-33:6). It was in the context of His charge to Moses to lead the people into Canaan that Moses called upon God to not leave him to this task, but to commit Himself to go up with the people (33:12-17). Despite Israel’s sin and rebellion, God agreed to go up with the nation because Moses had found favor in His sight.
- God had “known Moses by name,” and now Moses called upon Yahweh to make Himself known to him in the same intimate way. His petition to God was, “*Show me Your glory!*” Moses’ plea was for God to grant him the most intimate insight into His person and character, and God’s response was that He would cause all His *goodness* to pass before him and also proclaim His *name* to him. Most importantly, He would condescend to grant Moses’ request purely as an act of sovereign grace: “*I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion*” (33:18-19).
- After having Moses prepare two new stone tablets, God called him back up to Mount Sinai. There He descended onto the mountain in His glory-cloud and fulfilled His word to Moses. Moses’ presence with God on the mountain was not new; he had previously met there with God and received the covenant on stone tablets. But this time it was different. God would renew His covenant in the context of His greatest self-disclosure to Israel. Moses had asked to see Yahweh’s glory, and now when he came down off the mountain his face shone with the radiance of the glory that had been revealed to him. As promised, God made His goodness pass before Moses and He proclaimed His name to him: “*The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.*” (ref. 34:1-7)

God’s self-revelation to Moses was the disclosure of His essential **goodness**, which goodness He then interpreted by the proclamation of His **sovereign mercy**. In His goodness God has determined to be merciful, but this mercy is a matter, not of obligation, but of sovereign grace: *He will be gracious to whom He wills*. This is the context from which Paul drew, and it provides rich insight into his argument in this Romans passage. Among other things, it shows why the principle of mercy will not permit the charge of injustice to be leveled against God. The reason is simply this: *because mercy is condescending favor and kindness toward the undeserving, the refusal to extend mercy can never be a matter of injustice*.

In fact, it is just the opposite. Mercy toward sinners is contrary to justice, unless mercy is extended in a context in which justice is vindicated. Thus God's self-revealing proclamation to Moses was that He forgives iniquity, transgression and sin, *and yet will by no means leave the guilty unpunished* (ref. again 34:6-7).

- c. Paul's first citation focuses on the matter of divine mercy, and his point was to show that mercy depends entirely on divine prerogative and initiative. Lest his readers miss this, he followed up his quotation with a word of commentary: "*So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy*" (9:16). This leaves no doubt as to how Paul viewed God's mercy: mercy finds no impetus in the virtue or effort of its object. Indeed, it could not be otherwise. For the very nature of *mercy* is that it is extended to an undeserving object. Therefore, the idea of "deserved mercy" is an oxymoron; *favor toward the deserving is not mercy but what is rightly owed*. How, then, can mercy be tied to "the one who wills or the one who runs"? For divine mercy to be mercy, it must be entirely of the God who is merciful. And since, by definition, it can find no merit in its object, God's mercy must also be sovereignly dispensed.

Returning to Paul's previous contention regarding God's sovereignty in election, the issue of mercy refutes the charge of divine injustice in election by showing that election itself is a matter of mercy, and therefore undeserved (ref. 9:9-15 together). Recall again that Paul's citation is from an Old Testament context in which God's declaration of mercy pertains to His determination to forgive and preserve Israel in spite of the nation's flagrant violation of His covenant with them. Most importantly, God determined to do so because of His commitment to His promise to the patriarchs. Thus Paul's point in context:

God extends mercy purely as a matter of sovereign determination apart from any worthiness in the object. Given the human condition, mercy can find no worth or merit in its object. And while the bestowal of mercy is divinely determined, this determination proceeds out of God's commitment to fulfill His promise.

Behind all of God's dealings is His eternal *purpose* to finally sum up all things in the created order in Christ. And God's *promise* – rearticulated and amplified throughout Old Testament history – is simply His stated commitment to His creatures to accomplish that purpose. **The divine promise is the promise of the gospel.** And precisely because God has determined to accomplish His purpose *in history* through the vehicle of *humanity*, the outworking of His promise toward the fulfillment of His purpose involves the reality of divine *election*. God exercises choice among men for the sake of His purpose (ref. again 9:11). Thus God's choice of men transcends the men themselves; it serves the accomplishment of His saving purpose in Christ. The election of individual men – and even God's choice of the nation of Israel itself – finds its ultimate point of reference in the elect, beloved Son of the promise; the one in whom God's choice of men finds its meaning and fruition.

- d. Paul's second point of refutation of divine injustice focuses upon God's hardening of Pharaoh (9:17). This citation is also taken from Exodus and is set in the context of Yahweh's ongoing confrontation with Pharaoh that culminated with His deliverance of Israel from their enslavement in Egypt. It expresses a proclamation God directed to Pharaoh in the context of His bringing His seventh plague upon Egypt (Exodus 9:13-18). Paul's citation varies from both the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint, but it captures the significance of God's words. For when God declared that He had caused Pharaoh to stand (remain), the point is that God had given him the throne of Egypt and preserved him in that status for the present time of His triumph.

Repeatedly God had sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh with the command to release His covenant people, and He accompanied His directive with a succession of ten supernatural judgments. Some of those provoked a commitment of obedience from Pharaoh, but in each case, when the plague was lifted, Pharaoh "hardened his heart" and reneged on his word (cf. Exodus 8:1-15, 20-32). In the end, each of the first nine plagues failed to exact Pharaoh's compliance; his heart remained hard. But this non-compliance was by God's design, as indicated by the passage cited by Paul. For, from the beginning God revealed to Moses His intention to bring Pharaoh to a climax of judgment. Though the command to release Israel would be issued over and over again, God would yet "hold" Pharaoh in opposition to Him until He could finally exact the tenth and pinnacle plague of the first-born (cf. Exodus 3:16-20, 4:19-23, 9:8-12, 10:1-11:10).

Hundreds of years earlier God had revealed to Abraham that his descendents would inherit the covenant promises through a great act of divine redemption (Genesis 15:12-16). And the means of that redemption would be the destruction of their subjugators, epitomized in the person of Pharaoh. The king of Egypt stood between Israel and their receipt of the covenant promise. In this way God's own integrity, as well as His power to fulfill His word, were on the line in His confrontation with Pharaoh. But far from representing a threat to the promise, Egypt's ruler was God's appointed vessel to fulfill and advance it.

God preserved Pharaoh's reign – He "raised him up" – in order to use him to show how the reception of the Abrahamic promise depended upon the exercise of divine, sovereign power in *redemption*. God would fulfill His promise according to His purpose. But He would take His people to Himself through the act of delivering them from their cruel bondage; a bondage from which they were powerless to escape. Moreover, by "holding" Pharaoh in stubborn opposition throughout the length of His plagues God revealed that His people's enslavement could not be broken through any manifestation of His presence or power short of the *death of the first-born*. Israel, God's beloved son, would only be redeemed and delivered through the exchange of one first-born for another (Exodus 4:21-23). And having become Yahweh's redeemed first-born, the nation was to express its sanctified status as first-born by the consecration of its own first-born (cf. Exodus 11:1-12:29, 13:1-16, 22:29-30, 34:19-20; Numbers 3:40-51, 8:5-18; etc.).

- e. As he did before, Paul followed his second citation with his own commentary: “*So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires*” (9:18). The implication of Paul’s comment is that God’s preservation of Pharaoh represented an act of divine hardening, and that this hardening was to serve God’s goal of manifesting His power in such a way that His name would be proclaimed in all the earth. What is immediately apparent about Paul’s statement is that, at first glance, it seems to argue *for* the charge he was attempting to refute. That is to say, the matter of God’s hardening of Pharaoh would seem to support the contention that God is unjust in His dealings with men. For wasn’t Paul saying that God sovereignly hardened the heart of the king of Egypt in order to destroy him and thereby demonstrate His power in him? *Isn’t it a spectacular act of injustice to constrain a man to do evil and then destroy him for that evil?* In order to address this concern, several things need to be considered.

First of all, it must be reiterated that God’s “hardening” of Pharaoh was simply His determination to hold him in his opposition to the divine command. This is obvious from the Exodus account itself. Furthermore, the text shows that this hardening served God’s determination to execute a progression of plagues against Pharaoh that would culminate with Israel’s deliverance through the death of Egypt’s first-born. God did not harden Pharaoh’s heart because it was necessary to secure the deliverance of Israel; *He did it because of His design that the whole of the Exodus episode with all of its particulars would gloriously portray the eschatological redemption to come.* He did it for the purpose of prefiguring the final act of divine redemption the Israelite deliverance only typified.

Second, God’s hardening parallels His mercy in that they both reflect the principle of *election*. Both are a form of divine “choosing,” and therefore have their basis in God’s intention to fulfill His eternal purpose as He has promised (ref. again 9:6-13). So, in the case of the Exodus, God’s election of Pharaoh and His election of Israel served the same end, namely the first-level fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. Specifically, God’s hardening of Pharaoh was the *means* by which He extended His mercy to Israel. This relation between mercy and hardening is a key theme in Paul’s later argument (ref. 9:22-23, 11:1-32). Pharaoh’s hardening yielded Israel’s deliverance from bondage, and both served the demonstration of God’s power and the exaltation of His name in all the earth.

By his commentary Paul expressed that both mercy and hardening are the prerogative of divine sovereignty, but a closer look at the contexts he was drawing from – as well as a forward look in the Roman epistle – shows that the link between mercy and hardening is not simply the sovereignty of God. As already implied, *the link is the sovereign accomplishment of the divine purpose that finds its ultimate referent in Jesus Christ and His saving work.* God’s hardening of Pharaoh, as much as His mercy to Israel, found its point of reference in God’s sovereign fulfillment of His promise to Abraham and his seed. And when the ultimate significance of the Exodus in salvation history is recognized, all of its particulars are brought into the full radiance of their gospel glory.

The final thing to consider is Paul's juxtaposition of *hardening* and *mercy*. In their usage in this context, they represent two opposing realities. Simply put, divine hardening in the Exodus context is effectively the refusal of divine mercy. For God did not take a compliant man and sear his spiritual conscience. Neither did He refuse to make Himself known to Pharaoh. God hardened Pharaoh's heart by disclosing Himself to him through Moses and Aaron, certifying His self-disclosure by manifesting His divine power, declaring to Pharaoh what He required of him, *and then leaving him to himself*. Whereas God's mercy is His active intervention in the lives of sinful men, His hardening is His leaving them to follow their own path of autonomy and self-destruction. Mercy **overcomes** the hardness of the human heart; hardening **consigns** men to it. The way in which God hardens the hearts of men is by determining not to soften them.

Thus the principle of sovereign hardening is consistent with the existence and operation of human freedom. Just as God does not take the compliant and render them intractable in order to destroy them, so He does not set aside their free exercise of their own wills. This is clearly seen in the case of Pharaoh. God's self-revelation to Pharaoh through Moses was also His self-revelation to Israel. Each heard the same message, understood the divine intention, and experienced the same supernatural signs. But in the one instance God's self-disclosure ultimately became an act of mercy bringing deliverance; in the other it became an act of hardening bringing destruction. So also it was with Judas Iscariot. Jesus' self-disclosure, instruction, and loving interaction with him were identical to the other eleven disciples. Judas enjoyed the same privilege as the elect apostles, yet in the end he proved to be the son of perdition, appointed for destruction.

As with divine hardening, sovereign mercy also operates within the realm of human freedom. It is often charged that a sovereign salvation implies that God saves men against their will, that He "drags them kicking and screaming into the kingdom." Not only does human experience prove this contention to be ludicrous, the Scripture itself refutes it. Perhaps no greater statement of the operation of saving mercy exists than that of the psalmist: "*Your people will be a free-will offering in the day of Your power*" (110:3). In exercising His mercy God does not restrain or overthrow human will; He illumines men's minds to perceive Him, themselves, and His salvation in Christ as each really is. He shines in their hearts so as to give them the light of the knowledge of His own glory that is in the face of Jesus Christ. And when He so shines upon those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, they respond willingly and come to the Savior with great joy and gratitude (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6; Luke 1:67-79; John 8:12, 12:35-46; etc.).

As Israel repeatedly found sovereign mercy in her desperation, so each act of deliverance spoke of the great day of the vindication of Yahweh's power and grace: "*Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose yourself from the chains around your neck, O captive daughter of Zion. For thus says the Lord, 'You were sold for nothing and you will be redeemed without money...Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, "Here I am."'*" How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'"