

May 21, 2017

Psalm 135:3-14 / Isaiah 45:9-13 / Romans 9:17-29
 The Deep Mystery of God's Sovereign Freedom in Election

Whenever I preach, I approach the task with a degree of humility (even fear and trepidation) lest I interpret something, or teach something, or apply something in a way that's contrary to what God intended. And that's never as true as it is today. Because today we venture into truth so deep that even the apostle Paul approaches his sharing of it with a notable sense of humility.

He doesn't use the common and definitive O.T. prophetic tone of, "Thus saith the Lord!" Nor does he use the firm and corrective tone of rebuke that we find in parts of Corinthians and Galatians, where he has to rebuke them for allowing, embracing or teaching things – they should have known were wrong.

No, today we find Paul venturing into truth so deep, and a mystery so profound, that he approaches it by asking: "What if...? "What if God, choosing to show His wrath...?" (v. 22) Or again, "What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known...?" (v. 23)

He's obviously considered this in great depth, and believes this IS the truth that best explains the ultimate mystery of God's sovereign choice of people in election. Yet, because it's shrouded in mystery, he chooses to use the more humble, "What if God..."

And even when he does declare that God sovereignly chooses some over others, showing mercy to some, and hardening others – knowing people will object and ask, "Then why does God blame us, for who resists His will?" He does NOT give a definitive answer. He simply answers their question with one of his own: "Who are you (that is, as a mere finite human being) to talk back to God?"

If God is the Potter, and He chooses to form two vessels from one lump of clay – one into one shape and another into another – *WHO IS THE CLAY TO OBJECT?!*

Can't you just picture a lump of clay looking up at the potter arguing and shaking its fist and saying "what the heck do you think you're doing"?!

You see, what Paul wants us to understand is that whatever God does (because He is righteous and just) is also perfect, and right, and just – or He wouldn't do it! In fact (and this comes as a surprise to many), it's perfect and right and good and just – even if it doesn't seem that way to us! Because what makes something just is not that we as humans agree with it, but the fact that God does it the way that He does!

And therefore, when we come to things we can't fully understand, we must simply concede that our all-wise, completely just and unspeakably holy God (who knows all things) does it the way He does because He knows all the possible options, and has chosen the way that best accomplishes His perfect purposes in creation & redemption.

And though we would like a detailed and lengthy explanation as to why, God no more needs to give us that lengthy explanation, than parents need to give their 2 year old a full, extensive, and detailed explanation for every parenting choice they make on his or her behalf!

Being far wiser than the child, they must simply DO what they know is BEST, realizing that the child may not like it, and at their age wouldn't even be able to understand it if it were explained to them. Someday, when they're much older and wiser, they might be able to understand it – but not when they're two!

And the same is true for us when it comes to the deep mysteries of election. We may wrestle with it now, and question the rightness of it all

now, but when we're in His presence in eternity we will know (simply by knowing Him more fully) that the things we struggled so hard to accept in this life, could really be no other way.

In fact, faith and wisdom should tell us (because of what we already know about God) that if we were like Him in every way, and knew all He knows, we would do it the same exact way. For if there were a better way, God would have chosen that way.

Which brings us to the **FIRST** point I want to make today, regarding the truth of Deut. 29:29 and how it relates to this verse. Deut. 29:29 reads: “*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and our children forever, that we may follow the words of this law.*”

In this life we will never fully understand why God decreed some of the laws in the O.T. – that's what Moses is referring to in that verse. God has NOT revealed to us all the “whys.” But what He HAS revealed He expects us to affirm and believe, trusting the secret things are secret – precisely because our finite minds wouldn't understand them even if He did try to explain them.

In the end, we CANNOT fully understand WHY God chooses some and rejects others (that's the “secret thing” that belongs to the LORD alone). He knows and we don't. Yet WE DO KNOW (because Paul tells us here in v. 11a, making it one of the “revealed things”) – that His choice of them was made “*before they were ever born.*” And we ALSO KNOW (because it's also revealed in vv. 11 and 16) that it was done this way so that “*His purpose in election might stand.*”

He decreed that He would save us by grace, or “by the mercy of Him who calls,” and NOT by any foreseen works, effort, or desire on our part. Which means that the ultimate reason God chooses some and rejects others, could only be known if we could fully plumb the infinite recesses of the Being, knowledge and purposes and of God.

AND LISTEN: For God to do it this way (that is, not conditioned on anything in or done by us) is NOT unjust!

For as Paul says in vv. 14-15: “*Is God unjust (that is, for doing it this way)? Not at all! For as He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”*

So, why must mercy be entirely apart from anything in or done by us? Because mercy that is required, or mercy that is deserved, could never be called mercy! For mercy (by its very definition) is getting what one does not deserve! It’s deserving wrath & punishment for committing some horrible crime, but getting completely unexpected kindness in return.

Mercy that God was required to give, would not be mercy! It would be payment. It would be compensation, wages owed, or a reward earned and given in exchange for something we did or worked for – and thus it would make salvation a matter of works.

It goes back to the answer I gave to those students I mentioned last week from Wheaton College: “*If salvation is to be by grace, then this is how it has to be...*” God’s sovereign and free choice to show mercy to some and not to others – HAS TO BE – totally apart from anything they do or desire – or salvation becomes a matter of works. And if it’s by works, then all the glory in redemption go to man’s efforts and desires, instead of God’s magnificent grace, kindness and mercy.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** clue as to why God does things the way Paul describes, or reveals, in this chapter. And it all revolves around His stated purpose of making the riches of His glory (or the wonder and beauty of all that He is) known throughout the earth (Vv. 17, 22, and 23).

In v. 17 Paul quotes Ex. 9:16 which says of Pharaoh: “*I raised you up for this very purpose, that I may display my power in you, and that my name*

might be proclaimed in all the earth." It's a verse that not only shows us God is sovereign over evil (raising up a corrupt Pharaoh to the position of one of the mightiest world leaders of his day, both economically and militarily), but that He did it so as to display His divine power and make His name known throughout the earth, by defeating Pharaoh and his armies at the Red Sea where he and all his soldiers were drowned.

It was an act of divine power, says Exodus 15:8-15, that caused the name of Yahweh to be spoken of, revered, and feared throughout the earth! An act of power that still to this day brings glory to His name in songs, plays and movies!

And Paul simply uses PHARAOH to make his point about divine election in general, where he says in v. 18: "*Therefore, God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy and He hardens whom He wants to harden.*"

And it is obvious from the way v. 18 is phrased, that it isn't just Pharaoh and the Israelites that that are examples of God's election, it's everyone – as vv. 19-25 confirm. "*God has mercy on whom He wants (or wills) to have mercy / and He hardens (or leaves in their unbelieving state) whom He wants (or wills) to harden.*" That's the way it works across the board.

And because Paul knew that those who were following his argument would UNDERSTAND that he was referring to election in the general sense, and NOT SIMPLY to Pharaoh as an isolated example, he also knew they would object!

He knew how very hard it is for the human mind to accept this concept – a mind which by nature makes US, and WHAT SEEMS FAIR TO US, to be the center around which all our thinking revolves.

And people with a man-centered, or self-centered worldview, are unable to accept truth that requires a Christ-centered or God-centered perspective in order to understand it!

So, KNOWING that many people reading this wouldn't like what he's just said, he speaks to the objection he knows many will have, saying in v. 19-20: "*One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists His will?"*

That is: "*If it's GOD who softens hearts, and God who hardens the hearts of people, how can anyone be blamed for what they do? For who can resist the determinate will of God?*"

And what's Paul's answer? Well, it's really not an answer! In fact, it's somewhat of a rebuke, for having the audacity to even question the justness and rightness and wisdom of the way God chooses to do things!

Thus Paul says in v. 20: "*But who are you, O man (that is, anyone who objects to this truth) to talk back to God?*" What right do we have (you and I or anyone else), asks Paul, as finite, limited, and sinful human beings, to question the ways of a God who is perfect, and just, and holy, and so good, there is no trace of sin in Him at all. A God who is all-knowing, all-wise and can do no wrong?

What right do sinners have to question the fact that God, knowing all that He does, chose to do things this way? It's like that 2-year-old I mentioned before, going up to his parents – *knowing next to nothing, and barely able to talk* – belligerently calling into question his parents' wisdom for not to let him do whatever seems right to him, whenever, and however, he feels like doing it!

In other words, to any objector to this doctrine (and surely there's at least one here today who feels that God having mercy on some and hardening others is wrong) Paul essentially says: "*This is simply the way it is.*"

It's one of the things God HAS "revealed," and therefore is for us and our children to know it, accept it, believe it and obey it.

For God DOES (and not just here) explicitly say in His Word (using Pharaoh as only one example) that this is how He does it (Ex. 7:3, 7:13-14, 8:19, 9:6, 10:1, etc).

And thus, in humility, as sinful creatures before their holy Creator, He expects us to come to the point of saying: “*I don’t understand all the why’s, but I DO understand this IS what you’ve revealed. And thus I bow and affirm that which you, in your infinite understanding, declare to be true.*”

Which brings us to our LAST point, and one I hope you will pray to be able to understand! What is it? We vaguely touched on it in the last point from v. 17, but I want to make it as clear as I possibly can: It’s the TRUTH that God ultimately does all things for the glory and fame and renown of His holy name.

And we must see it’s NOT egotistical of God to do so! In fact, because God is the greatest of all Beings, and our greatest pleasure or delight comes in knowing Him and worshipping Him, He would do US the greatest disservice if He did not seek to display the glory of all He is!

You see, God did not create because He was lonely and needed someone to love. Acts 17:25 tells us that God has no needs! A needy God could never be a worship-worthy God, he’d be a god we feel sorry for! NO! The Father and the Son were eternally happy in the uninterrupted and delight-filled love they had for each other from infinite ages past! They did not need anything else, or need to create anything else! They would have continued to be more than content and delighted in the love they had for each other.

So, why DID God create, if it wasn’t to meet some need in Himself?

And all of Scripture confirms He did it so that He might display the wonder or glory of all that He is as God to all that He made. / He did it (as with all things) to display His glory! (Ps. 8 / Ps. 29 / Ps. 57 / etc.)

He did it, as Paul says in Rom. 1:19-20, to, “*make known His invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature.*” The whole creation, and everything He does in it, is for the purpose of revealing, declaring, or displaying God’s glory! (Ps. 19).

Likewise, Exod. 14 tells us that God’s purpose of raising up, and then defeating Pharaoh’s armies, was to “*gain glory for Himself.*” Is. 43:7 tells us that He created and formed and called a people to Himself – “*for His glory.*” He did it to bring Himself glory!

And in Is. 61:1-3 and Ezek. 36:22-27, we are told that the things God will do for His people in redeeming, saving and sanctifying them, “are not for our sake, but for the sake of His holy name” or “the display of HIS splendor.”

He does them – *He saves and forgives and transforms and sanctifies us* – in order to display how great and powerful and loving and righteous and faithful and gracious and merciful He is! Something accentuated all the more by our sin!

In fact, it is *THIS TRUTH ALONE* which can explain how God can be sovereign, and yet sin could be an intended part of His plan for this age. Why? Because sin was necessary to the display of God’s glory.

For if God’s purpose in creating (as we’ve seen) was to display the wonder of all He is – it could not happen in a perfect world. For in a perfect world we could know **NOTHING** of God’s mercy and fathomless grace. **NOTHING** of His power to change and restore and make all things new. **NOTHING** of His justice and wrath and pardon and forgiveness and transforming love!

In fact, if I John 3:16 is true (as I hope you believe it is!) and we know the depths of true love only because Jesus sacrificed His life for us: Then

we'd really never know what true love is if it weren't for the fallenness of this world that made His sacrifice for our sins necessary, and thereby displayed the love of God in the most exalted way ever known to man – through the sacrifice of Jesus for fallen sinners.

You see, only if we understand that God's purpose in creating was to display His glory, or the wonder of all that He is, and that so much of who He is would have been hidden forever had it not been for humanity's fall into sin – *can we ever even come close to answering how it is that God can be sovereign and holy and good and yet create a world where sin reigns (at least in this age)?*

For once sin has achieved its purpose of revealing all the glorious and redemptive qualities of God that would never have been known apart from it – it shall be done away with and paradise will be restored, in the age to come.

That's essentially what Paul tells us in vv. 22-29 with his two, "what if..." statements. That this truth best explains why God has determined to choose some and not others. It's to display the glory of His wrath and power and patience and mercy.

Listen as I read vv. 22-24: "*What if God, choosing to show His wrath & make His power known, bore with great patience the objects of His wrath, prepared for destruction? What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom He has also called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles.*"

And then, what Paul does in vv. 25-29 is back up his assertion with multiple verses from the OT Scriptures. So he quotes Hosea 2:23, Hosea 1:10, Isaiah 10:22-23 and Isaiah 1:9 – verses which show God's mercy in choosing certain Gentiles (vv. 25-26), His wrath in hardening all but the elect Jews, or

the remnant (v. 27), and His power and patience in withholding the punishment people as sinners deserve even now for their sin.

So, says Paul, election is intended to DISPLAY the glories of God's sovereignty, freedom, grace, patience and mercy to those who know they don't deserve it – and never could! Election makes the riches of God's mercy known, to those who see others experiencing His wrath, and yet find themselves to be the objects of His mercy – even though *they KNOW they themselves also deserve wrath!*

LISTEN: Nothing displays the glories of God's grace more than the truth of God's unconditional, undeserved, election – a grace, *which because it IS unconditional, means we can consider NO ONE to be beyond the hope of being saved!*

NO ONE can have a record so bad it will keep God from bringing in all He has chosen to bring in! Which means election (contrary to what some say) is not a reason for hopelessness, but the greatest source of hope a sin-enslaved person could ever have!

Take the terrorist we all saw in the video on Easter Sunday, where Jesus appeared to him in his prison cell. If you were astute you would have asked, "Why him? He was a terrorist! He was filled with hate. Why did Jesus appear to him? And why not all the other Muslim prisoners? He wasn't searching for Jesus. He wasn't seeking. Nor were all the others who said Jesus appeared to them in their dreams. Why them and not others?"

How does one explain it? You know! Paul's just told us! It's unconditional election! As Isaiah 65:1 tells us: "*I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation (and we could add "a person") that did not call on my name, I said, "Here am I, here am I."*" It's just one more O.T. verse about election – all of which display the glory of God's grace.