

May 28, 2017

Ephesians 2:1-10 / Titus 3:3-8 / Romans 9:30-33

God's Grace – The Stumbling Block That Makes People Fall

Today we come to a text which gives me a wonderful opportunity to clear up some of the questions people surely have in regard to vv. 17-29 from last week. Questions regarding the issues of election, unbelief, and God “hardening” the hearts of certain individuals, while “showing mercy” to others.

I know that for some of you, what we've been looking at has been new, maybe a little confusing, and hard for you to process. And I get that. I wrestled with it myself, because it does involve a deep mystery.

Yet difficult as it may be for some, let me say that any struggle to try and understand truth is worth it. For we ARE called (as we saw last week from Deut. 29:29) to seek to understand, affirm and obey “*the revealed things.*” Not the “*secret things*” which are for God alone, but the things God HAS revealed. For scripturally speaking, we do not have the right (as believers) to skip over, or ignore, or pretend they don't matter – as many do when it comes to these truths.

For in these verses Paul explains why it is that some people stubbornly refuse to come to faith in Jesus for salvation, while others gladly welcome Christ and the Gospel message. He helps us gain insight into the mystery of how it is that God hardened the hearts of most Jews in unbelief toward Jesus, while at the very same time opening the hearts of many Gentiles to receive Christ by faith.

So, I want you to know: If you have friends, or relatives, or people you know, who are highly resistant to the Gospel and dig their heels in when it comes to placing their faith in Jesus, what Paul shares today is ONE of the major reasons they are so resistant.

And YES, it is because God in some way hardens their hearts, as Paul says in v. 24. Yet today what we get to see is how God does that. We will get to see what God used (in the case of Pharaoh, the Israelites and the Gentiles) to harden the hearts of some and soften (or show mercy and compassion) of others.

But **FIRST**, before I do that, I need to make one thing perfectly clear: That Scripture teaches God didn't simply snap His fingers and make their hearts hard. We've been looking at this in regard to Pharaoh at the Wednesday Night Bible Study (where we've been studying the book of Exodus this past year). And what we've found is that God didn't simply gaze at Pharaoh, point His finger and harden his heart.

Not at all! In chapter 7:12-13, we saw that God used the ability of the Egyptian magician's to *mimic* the miracle of Moses, turning their own staffs into snakes also. And in seeing it, Pharaoh became less awed by what God did, and thus his heart became hardened.

The same was true with turning the Nile River into blood. Chapter 7:22 says: *"But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their magical arts, and Pharaoh's heart became hard..."*

So we see that Pharaoh observed and reasoned that if his magicians could do the same thing, the God of the Israelites was not really to be feared.

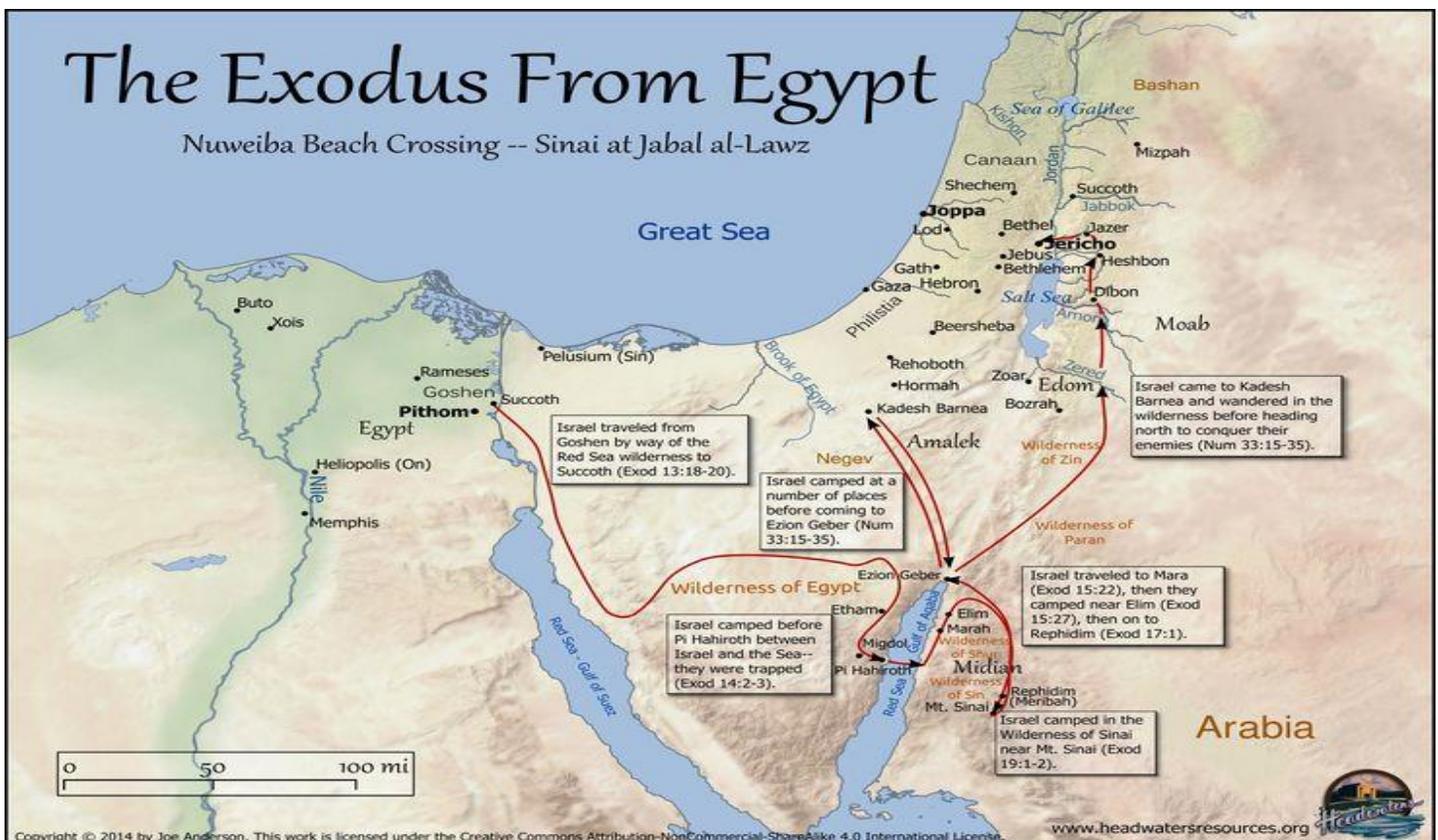
In Chap. 8 – with the frogs – what hardened Pharaoh's heart was Moses removing the plague of frogs. Thus, we read in Exodus 8:15: *"But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said."*

The same thing happens again with the *FLIES* in 8:30-32, the *HAIL* in 9:33-35, and the *LOCUSTS* in 10:18-20. Even after the deaths of the firstborn, when they let the people go, it was Pharaoh and his officials

discussing the money they would lose without the slave labor of the Israelites that hardened their own hearts and made them go after them in the desert! It was their own greed that hardened their hearts.

Likewise, in Ex. 14:1-19 God tells the Israelites to go south along the west bank of the Red Sea and encamp there. Then v. 3 says: “Pharaoh will think, *“The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.”* And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart to pursue them.”

You see, logic would have said they should have simply crossed over at the top of the Red Sea and then veered south and east. But what God does is have them head south on the western shore of the Red Sea -- which makes Pharaoh think they are disoriented and lost, and easy prey which he can wipe out. So he goes after them, to kill them, only to have God lure them into the sea & swallow them up in defeat.



So, did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Yes, He did! (Ex. 7:3 / 9:12 / 10:20 / 10:27 / 11:10 / etc.) But listen, this is very important! He did it in such a way that Pharaoh was still culpable and responsible! He did it in such a way that the Scriptures can also say (without any contradiction) that, "*Pharaoh hardened his heart,*" and it means "*he hardened his own heart*" (8:15 / 8:19 / and 8:32).

If you had asked Pharaoh if he felt someone else was hardening his heart against his will, he would have said: "Absolutely not! I made my own decisions! I did exactly what I wanted to do and felt like doing and choose to do! It was me!"

So, what do we see? God sovereignly using secondary causes, events & circumstances to carry out to the minutest detail exactly what He had determined beforehand to do!

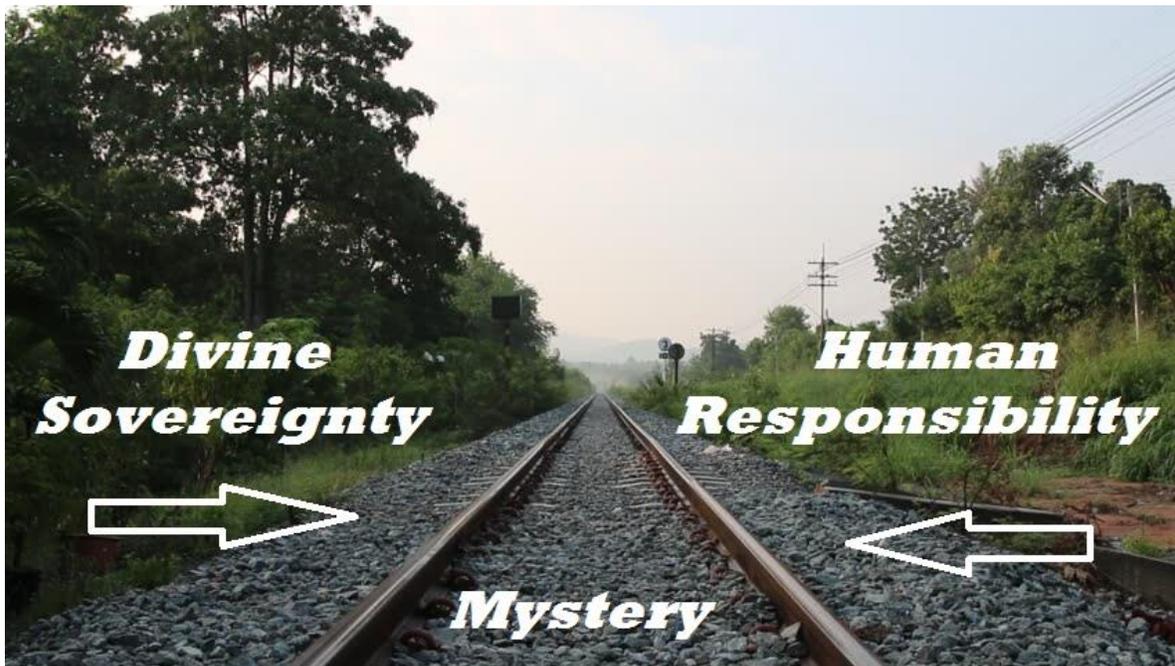
And the mystery we will never crack is how God can ordain every event in the whole process and yet in doing so – never violate the will of man and have us remain entirely responsible for our words, choices and actions.

That's what we need to see: ***That the sovereignty of God does NOT negate the responsibility of man, and the will of man does NOT in any way negate the fact that God sovereignly ordains, before it ever happens, ALL that comes to pass.***

It's what J. I. Packer calls an "antinomy." Two truths that appear to contradict, oppose or nullify each other – yet do not. And to explain it, he uses the illustration of two railroad tracks; the space in between representing the mystery separating the two truths.

The tracks run side by side, and if you look straight down a long stretch of track, they appear to get closer. But they never really touch. The mystery seems to be closing but it always remains.

We can explain responsibility, and we can explain sovereignty, but the precise interworking of those two truths (the space between those two tracks) is a mystery the human mind can never fully fathom. We must simply affirm both are true – and in such a way that neither one ever lessens or does away with the other.



That's why the Scriptures vacillate back and forth when they speak about God hardening Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh hardening his own heart. Because both are true. For God did it in such a way, that Pharaoh – *seeing certain things, and getting certain advice, and interpreting certain circumstances* – hardened his own heart.

God acted sovereignly & Pharaoh chose exactly what he wanted. The preordained will of God was done and yet Pharaoh was still responsible for all his choices and actions. And we know that this is the way things are, because Exodus, and Paul in this passage, and even Jesus Himself affirm these two truths.

In fact, in Lk. 22:22, Jesus states both in a way that many of us would hesitate ever saying -- thinking we'd be contradicting ourselves!

Speaking of His own betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus says: *“The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed (literally determined or determined beforehand), but woe to the man who betrays Him.”*

You see, in the sovereign plan of God, Judas was doing exactly what God had ordained from before time began, yet he was still responsible for doing it, says Jesus! God knew and used Judas greed and love for money (John 12:6) as the secondary cause to bring about His pre-ordained plan through Judas free choice!

Which brings us back to our text, and the **SECOND** thing I need to point out. That in terms of the Gentiles and the Jews, God used one and the same thing to harden the one group and soften or show mercy and compassion to the other – He used Jesus!

For Jesus, as Paul says in v. 32 & 33, is “the stumbling stone” referred to in Is. 8:14. Quoting that verse he says: *“See, I lay in Zion, a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”* That’s Is. 8:14. And then he adds 28:16 which states: *“And the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.”*

So interestingly, God uses one and the same person – ***Jesus Christ, and the grace offered in Him*** – to harden the hearts of some (Is. 8:14) and soften the hearts of others (Is. 28:16).

The *SAME JESUS* who melts the hearts of some the very first time they ever hear of Him, actually hardens the hearts of others no matter how many times they hear of Him! Christ being the means God uses to soften the hearts of His elect, and harden the hearts of the non-elect. And since it’s their response to Christ that turns them one way or the other, they are fully responsible for that choice!

And LISTEN: The most interesting thing of all (and we see this in the Gospels too) is that those who are the most resistant, or the most

hardened to Jesus – are the Jews! The religious people. The moral people. The people who had been taught God’s Law, and should have been prepared through what is written in that law to receive the One it all pointed forward to when He came!

As Jews, they were seeking to live a religious and moral life. But as Paul saw in his ministry time and again, they were the ones who doggedly refuse to come to Christ, or admit that only in Him can true, acceptable, perfect, and saving righteousness be found!

That’s what Paul tells us in vv. 30-32. *“That the Gentiles, who did NOT pursue righteousness (and he means, “because they did not have an O.T. law to go by, like the Jews did) obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith (in Jesus, that is), but Israel (or the Jews) who pursued a law of righteousness, has NOT attained it.”*

Why not? Paul tells us in v. 32. It’s because the Jews, *“pursued it not by faith, but as it were by works.”*

What does Paul mean? To many Jews, the idea that they must *“earn their salvation by their works”* was so deeply ingrained in their hearts and minds, that they simply could not accept (their hearts were completely hardened to the idea) that God would give people (and especially Gentile people) salvation as a free gift in Christ who would be their acceptable righteousness before God! A gift they simply appropriated by grace, through faith.

That’s what happens to people who have convinced themselves that they must *EARN THEIR SALVATION* by rigorous religious duties & good works. It hardens them to the concept of free grace or salvation by the merits of another’s efforts performed on our behalf. Their pride (which is fed by a sense of self-righteousness) looks at grace and says, *“That’s too easy. It needs to be harder than that!”*

Like the elder brother in “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” they think grace makes salvation, or God’s acceptance of us, far too easy! Like the older brother (who feels he has “slaved for years” to earn or keep the Father’s love) such people get mad or become hardened against grace. In their minds, the Father is freely receiving sinful prodigals (in this case, the Gentiles) WITHOUT making them do any hard things to make up for their sins or earn it!

No hard work, no penance, no slaving for years to EARN the Father’s love and favor and acceptance – *as they felt they had to!*

You see, once one has adopted, or become convinced, that salvation is by works (as these Jews had): Their pride refuses to let them admit that their own personal attempts to be righteous will never measure up to the standard God demands! They can’t admit that.

That’s why they keep on rejecting Jesus, and keep on pushing, and striving, and trying to produce by their own efforts – a degree of righteousness God will find acceptable.

And what’s at the root of the problem? They had misunderstood the whole purpose of the Law – *just like many people today.*

For as Paul says in v. 32, “they pursued it not by faith, but as if it were by works.” They saw the law as a way of trying to earn God’s favor by works, which Paul has repeatedly said was never the purpose of the Law! It was never intended to be, as Paul says in v. 31, as “a law of righteousness” whereby one earned their salvation by their attempts to obey it.

Which brings us to our **LAST** point. The Law was *WAS* given to show us what pleases God, and to serve as the standard of perfect righteousness He requires. Yet in attempting to obey all of it, it was also intended to carry out it’s other purpose – that of showing us we are sinners. For anyone who tries to obey all of God’s law, in every way, all the time, will

discover they CAN'T POSSIBLY DO IT! By trying to obey it they will realize they could never do ALL that God requires, AS perfectly as He requires (Rom. 3:20).

In fact, they will discover that the law which was intended to restrain sin, actually makes sin increase! (Rom. 5:20) It shows us we are worse sinners than we initially thought!

And realizing we couldn't possibly keep it as God requires – leads us to seek a Savior who did keep it perfectly, so that WE might be saved by HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS and NOT OUR OWN!

Our righteousness is too flawed and shot through with sin to be in any way acceptable to a holy God. That's what a right understood of the law should do – drive us in faith to seek the gift of perfect righteousness which comes to us only through Jesus – and never by our works or obedience to the law (Gal. 3:21-24).

You see, the law was never meant to be a means to salvation, or an end unto itself. It was always intended to be a means for showing sinners what God demanded and THEIR COMPLETE INABILITY to provide it by our own flawed attempts to obey it.

That's why our efforts will never gain us the righteousness we need to acquire, while faith will. Because even our best efforts can only produce sin-stained and flawed righteousness, while faith lays hold of CHRIST and HIS flawless righteousness – *which is the only righteousness God accepts.*

Yet people's pride, and their unwillingness to admit that, is what keeps their hearts hardened in unbelief toward Jesus. Is it God that hardens them? Yes, in a very real sense it is. For it was God who sent Jesus, *“the stone over which men stumble, and the rock that makes them fall.”*

It was God who made salvation to be by grace, when human sin and pride always wants to make it by our efforts.

So, to answer the question many surely had after last week: The WAY God hardens the hearts of the non-elect, and softens the hearts of the elect – *IS ONE AND THE SAME!* It's by placing Jesus before them as the only way to be saved.

The **ELECT** hear that and will eventually come, being irresistibly drawn by the beauty and mercy and grace of Jesus. But the **NON-ELECT** hear it and it offends or turns them off.

So in pride they reject Him and ignore Him, refusing to believe they must come to Him to be made acceptable to God. Refusing to believe they must believe in the Lord Jesus to be justified or accepted before God.

The one comes to Christ and is saved; the other rejects God's offer of grace, seals their own fate, and receives in themselves the due penalty for their refusal to repent and believe.

Be sure, my friends, you are NOT among them!