

All Roads Lead Here: Objection!

By Jason Huff

August 20, 2017

Exodus 14:1-4; Job 40:1-14; 42:1-6; Romans 9:14-24

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 9:14-24. Listen now to God's holy Word. "What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and 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 also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?"

The chief role of the pastor is to preach and teach. When I can, I visit people and praying with them; I like to help people understand the Scripture; I like our fellowship time. But we believe in our tradition that God wants pastors to focus on preaching His Word. But *how* should I be preaching? Some folks want a Sunday morning pep talk. Others want a "relevant" sermon that gives advice on dealing with a troubled marriage or a loudmouth boss.

But preaching is not meant to make us feel good or give us advice. If I'm doing my job right, my preaching will explain Scripture in a way that presents God in all of His glory, and it should make you want to worship Him out of wonder and amazement and respect and reverence. My job is to explain God truthfully in His perfection and splendor, helping us believe that He is worthy of worship and that He sent His Son Jesus to save us. God works through faithful preaching. Faithful preaching persuades us that Jesus is our Savior, not because of fancy words or heartfelt sentiments but because the Spirit works through the truth.

I've said all that because today's passage deals with a controversial subject – the freedom of God's will and human will and predestination. Does God choose His people, or do we choose God? Does God predestine some for eternal glory and others for eternal destruction? Last week, we discovered that before we ever make a choice to follow God, before we were even born, God made His choices regarding us, including the choice to save us.

We found that God's choices are not like ours. He chose Isaac and not Ishmael to be Abraham's heir. He chose Jacob and not Esau to carry on Abraham and Isaac's line. He chose David and not his taller, stronger brothers to be king of Israel. And God chose to bless Israel, an insignificant nation, not because they would be loyal to Him but because He chose to make Himself known through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And we learned that God had the right to make those choices because He can have mercy on whoever He wants. Mercy by definition is optional – it isn't deserved or required. God can choose to have compassion on anyone He wishes, and if He doesn't have mercy on someone, He is still just. Our salvation, then, is not based on our desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

That means that God is in charge of all things, including who will be saved and who will be condemned. In today's passage, Paul quotes God speaking to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Let's get the backstory: the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years. Pharaoh wouldn't let them go, not even when God sent Moses to Pharaoh several times. The first five times Moses went to Pharaoh, Pharaoh hardened his heart and says "no" to freeing the Israelites, even when God sent five plagues.

But the last five times, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh said "no" five more times, but God was the one behind Pharaoh's "nos". Why did God do that? It was to show His power and glory to the world through freeing the Israelites from Egypt. God sent five more plagues until Pharaoh finally relented. God hardens Pharaoh's heart once more so that Pharaoh chases after the Israelites. The Egyptian army is swept away into the Red Sea, rendering them powerless to attack the Israelites again. Paul describes it this way – "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

This is the part we don't like. We don't like the idea that we could be condemned by God based on His choice alone. That's because of our sin nature. We express our "free will," our desire to be in control, super early. "No, Mommy, I'm not eating that." "No, Dad, I'm not going to do my homework." What do little children do in the store in front of millions of people? They throw temper tantrums! Why? Because they aren't getting their way.

As we get older, that desire to have our own way comes out in different ways. I don't want anybody to tell me what I can say, what I can do, what I can drink, what people I can sleep with. We want our desires, our choices, our wills to be pre-eminent. And this runs headlong into Paul's teaching that God has the final word on what's right and wrong, and He has the final word as to who He will reveal Himself to and who He won't.

We don't like the idea that God is the one who awakens our hearts to Jesus or hardens our hearts to hate Him. That's the central objection to Paul's teaching – he writes, "One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" That's the dilemma, right? Why would God condemn us for acting the way He made us? If, as a lot of people claim, we were just "born this way," why would God say "no" to the way He formed us?

Paul has an answer – not the answer we want, but the answer we need. It comes in two parts. The first is this: *God is so beyond us that His ways and will and decisions are beyond our comprehension.* Could you imagine trying to teach a three year old quantum physics? Most of us couldn't understand it, let alone someone barely out of diapers. Yet that's what we do when we attack God's right to do with His creation what He wants. We are nothing in comparison to God, Paul says – we are like lumps of clay to a potter. The potter's ways are beyond the clay's ability to understand. It's incredible to think that we could fathom God's ways.

Paul's explanation is not new – it's found in the Old Testament story of Job. Job did what was right in God's sight, and God blessed Job with a big family and lots of land. And long story short, because of a heavenly discussion that Job knows nothing about, Job loses it all. All his children die, his crops and cattle die, everything he has is gone in a moment. His wife is all he has left, and she tells him to curse God and die. But he doesn't. He says "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away – blessed be the name of the Lord."

Eventually, Job's friends start telling him he must have sinned greatly in order to bring this calamity upon himself. And Job says, "I don't deserve this. I was righteous. And I really want God to tell me what He was thinking, because this is ridiculous." The conversation with Job and his friends goes on for thirty chapters.

Finally, God shows up and starts asking Job questions. God interrogates him -- where were you when I made the universe? Have you seen the gates of death? Do you know how to make it rain or snow? Can you make a constellation in the sky? Can you make a human being and give him wisdom and understanding? And Job apologizes to God. Job gets no answer except that God is so much greater than he is. Job realizes that God is God and he isn't.

Paul gives us a potential explanation, a "what if"? What if God made some people for His condemnation but shows great patience with them in their wickedness so He can display His patience with them, as well as His justice? What if He does that so those of us He made to save would know the depths of His mercy in saving us? What if He did it so every part of His perfect personality, every part of His patience, kindness, goodness, long-suffering, and justice would be known to those He chose to enter His Kingdom? God has the right to do all that because it lines up with His character. He is both merciful and just, punishing the wicked but saving the faithful.

Paul presents all these questions as the truth – but because they are questions, we can't know for certain if this is what God is up to. And that's the point – God's ways are beyond us. He has revealed parts of Himself to us that we can imitate -- His love, grace, mercy and justice. But some things we simply can't know.

Our limitations help us understand the second part of God's answer regarding our objections to His choices: *we are not as self-determined as we think we are*. Paul pulls no punches – "who are you, O man, to talk back to God?" We are lumps of clay that God can form any way He wants. In the original language, it says some of us have "honorable" use and some have "dishonorable" use. As different interpreters put it, "Doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into?" (NLT) "If God needs one style of pottery especially designed to show his angry displeasure and another style carefully crafted to show his glorious goodness, isn't that all right?" (MSG)

God has the right to make us the way *He* wants. And if we're going to get over our desire to call the shots, we need to realize how much control God has over our lives and how little we have. Think about it. I have no control over where I was born. I have no control over my natural skin color, eye color, or hair color. I have no control over my DNA, so I am not in control of the diseases I am susceptible to, what addictions I might develop, my metabolism, my body structure. I have no control over how well I see or hear or how well my brain works.

I had no control over the family I was born into. I had no control over whether or not that family included a mom and a dad living in the same house, how they treated each other, and how they treated me. I had no control over whether they were rich or poor. You see where this is going, right? When we stop to contemplate it, there are very few things in life we determine. While it's said that the thing we can control is our attitude, we don't control whether or not we are susceptible to depression or other conditions that can affect our attitude. And we didn't control that we were born in a country where the gospel of Jesus can be presented freely, and we could hear it and believe in it.

What it comes down to is this: life isn't fair. It isn't fair that the Yankees can outspend the Tigers on ball players every year. It isn't fair that I'm not 7'6 and can make millions playing professional basketball. And on the serious side of things, it's not really fair that I live in America and have all the opportunities I do when a billion people around the world lack food and clothing and shelter. We think that free will, our choices, might make things fair, but they don't. My will is shaped by a myriad of tiny little details that God has put into place throughout my life. We might all agree that a game is fair if we all play by the same rules. But that doesn't mean all the players have the same chance of winning.

And yet nothing will be unfair when we reach eternity. Because of how God made us, how His will and our will work together, no one will spend eternity where they didn't choose to be. No one who genuinely loves God and wants to be with Him – who knows and trusts in the real God and not a god of their own making – no one like that will sit outside God's realm.

And while we might think otherwise, no one condemned to be outside of God's presence in hell for eternity is going to want to come to heaven. They might hate their punishment, and yet if you don't love God and don't trust Him and don't want to be around Him, heaven would be worse than hell because God's Kingdom is all about being with God and experiencing His glory. The way God has made us, no one will be treated unfairly, and no one will in the final analysis be placed where they do not belong.

So if God is much greater than we can fathom and we are not nearly as in control as we think we are, where does that leave us? Two final thoughts for the week: first, *questioning God is not the same as judging God*. If Job, the most righteous person on Earth, could question God, it's not off the table. The psalms question God a lot – why are my enemies succeeding? Where are you, God, in my troubles? Questioning God can be a good thing, because it acknowledges that we believe that God is there and that He is working – we just wonder why He's doing things the way He is and not the way we want.

But judging God is off the table. Judging God is putting God on trial, making Him answer for Himself to you. Judging God makes you God. If you say, "God isn't fair" or "God is mean" or "God can't be good" or "God doesn't exist because of this bad thing that happens," that's becoming God's judge, and that's dangerous. You can't follow the Father as your creator and love Jesus as your brother and be led by the Spirit as your counselor if you sit in judgment on them as their superior. So question God as you need – cry out to Him in your pain – it's OK to ask Him why when nothing makes sense. But never judge Him.

Last thought: *God's sovereign choices mean you are here today for a reason – to find Him.* You chose to come to church today. We can look at that choice a couple of ways. You could say that you made the decision because it's a good and moral thing to worship God. You may have made that decision because you love God and want to be with His people and want to learn more about Him. You could have made that decision because a friend asked you to be here today. You might be here because your parents made the choice and you had to come along.

Your choice happened because a myriad of other things all fell into place. You had someone along the way who helped you know God or at least know about church. Your choice came from neurons in your brain firing in a certain way and telling your body to get here today. Different experiences, different neurons, different result, you might not be here after all. You could chalk it all up to how you were raised, the people you've met, and the chemicals in your body all reacting.

But the explanation that Paul has is that God is at work. He has you at CrossWay for a reason. And I believe that reason is to meet Him, to get to know Him, to learn about our unique and wonderful God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe it was God's will since before there was time that you would be here today to recognize that Jesus is your Savior and Lord and believe in Him and trust in Him and follow Him. I believe this is God's will and work happening right now, for each one of us here. We do not know God's choices, so the very best conclusion is to believe God brought you here so you would get to know Him, that you would trust in Jesus and be saved.

So today, I encourage you to follow Jesus, as Paul encouraged others every day he was an apostle. We do not know the will of God or know why He works the ways He does, yet we do know this – He gave His son Jesus for us so that no one who turns to Him and genuinely loves Him and trusts in Him will lose their reward. He set the enormity of the universe in motion so that He could create us, sustain us, and claim us as His own. Remember that this week and turn to Him in praise.