

Chapter 42

The Case of Pharaoh

(Romans 9:17–20)

Predestination to salvation and eternal glory is real. It is unconditional. It involves the predestination of individuals. God's purpose to keep us is secure but it only applies to 'the elect'. Not every Jew is saved simply because he is an Israelite, as Paul has explained.

There are people who are not brought to salvation. Paul now comes to explain this side of the matter. ¹⁷*For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very thing I raised you. It "was so that I might show in you my power, and so that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."*'

Paul quotes Exodus 9:16. When Paul says that Pharaoh was 'raised up', he does not mean 'created'. God did not create Pharaoh to sin! Rather it means 'I have raised you up on the stage of history'. Pharaoh was a sinner by nature. God simply brought Pharaoh into the position where he wanted him. His birth, his life, his kingship were all steered by God. God had plans to give a great demonstration of his mighty power so that everyone would get to know about Yahweh, the God of Israel. This is what happened and this is what God intended would happen. ¹⁸*So therefore he has mercy on whom he wills and he hardens whom he wills.* 'Whom' is singular and refers to an individual. Pharaoh was not saved. The Israelites were individuals whom God saved by the blood of the lamb (see Hebrews 11:29).

The whole thread of thought continues to show that Paul is dealing with the predestination of individuals to salvation.

What is this hardening? It is not that God forces anyone to sin. It is not that he creates any hardening that was not there before. Sometimes in the story of Exodus it says that Pharaoh's heart 'was hardened'. Sometimes it says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Sometimes it says that God hardened his heart. The idea comes repeatedly in Exodus 4:21; 7:3, 13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 13:15; 14:4, 8, 17. The three ways of putting it, self-hardening, being hardened and God's hardening, are all one and the same thing. God's hardening is his working in a person's heart in such a way that he lets the sin get a hold on the sinner. God withdraws restraining influences. He hands people over to their own desires (see Romans 1:24). Satan adds his own influences. The sinner's heart is turned to hate God's people (see Psalm 105:25). There is nothing creative in any of this. God is not creating sinfulness. He is simply using sin to punish sin. The teaching is that God controls sin so that it gets God's will done and not the sinner's will. 'Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the gentiles and the people of Israel in this city, to conspire against your holy servant Jesus . . . They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen' (Acts 4:27, 28).

Paul next raises the question of **responsibility** for sin. Paul faces the objector: ¹⁹*So you will say to me, 'Why does he still find fault? For who has resisted his plan?'* The objector argues: 'Well, if God has this plan to use the sinner, how can God condemn anyone? The sinner is not able to resist so he ought not to be condemned.' However, this is to misunderstand the mystery of human responsibility and God's management of the world. There is no evading the fact of human sinfulness and guilt. The objector himself is a sinner. He is not being condemned because he is used by God; he is being condemned because of his deliberate sinfulness. Paul does not argue the point. He simply rebukes

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the spirit of the objector. ²⁰*O man! The question rather is, who are you to answer back to God? Will what has been shaped say to the one who shaped it, 'Why did you make me this way?' The objector has a wrong view of himself. Who are you? You are a man, a woman, a mere human being! Who do you think you are to tell God how things should be? There are more things in heaven and earth than are ever dreamt of in your philosophy! We are not in a position to 'answer back'. God is the Potter; we are the clay. Our knowledge of God is knowledge that comes by believing what he has revealed. The things that God reveals to us all end in mystery. The Bible never explains how human willpower and responsibility relate to God's sovereignty. The fact is men and women are responsible for what they do. Yet God uses their drive and energy and self-determination to fulfil not their will but his will. Sometimes the two aspects of the matter are taught side-by-side in the same verses of Scripture (Genesis 50:20; Acts 2:23).*

If you are without Christ you had best forget all about predestination for the moment. You are like a child who cannot add two plus two to get four, and yet wants to know about Einstein's theory of relativity! Forget predestination and start where you are! You are a sinner. Christ died for you. Believe that he is the Son of God. Believe that he bore your sins upon the cross. Give your life to him. Tell everyone that he has forgiven you, saved you and turned your life around. Skip Romans 9 and go to Romans 10! If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved (10:9). Begin there. Come back to Romans 9 in a few years' time!