

Many years ago, a law professor at Southern Methodist University terrorized students, and they appreciated him deeply. He taught a course in trial law. He set up the classroom to look like a courtroom. Students had to prosecute and defend cases. At the end of their presentations that professor proceeded to interrogate them about what they had said. He made them feel about two inches high and doubtful that they could ever win a case in a court of law.

Many students walked away from those grueling classes, wondering if they were cut out to be lawyers; only to have that professor come to them later and say, “Why don’t we get a cup of coffee, and I’ll show you how you could win that case.” One of his students asked him, “Why are you so hard on us?” He replied, “I want you to lose in class, so that you win in court.”

I tell you that anecdote for one reason. You will never amount to much, if you just want to be left alone so you can get on with your life. We all need something or someone that gets in our face and forces us to deal with something we’d rather not deal with. It could be a demanding teacher or a military drill instructor or the person sitting across from you at breakfast each morning, or it could be God.

What we read this morning about God will not leave you alone so you can get on with your life. You may walk away from here confused or offended, but that may be the best thing that has happened to your spiritual life in years. In any case it is designed to take you deeper into the mystery and majesty of God.

### Pharaoh before God

We have a problem before we read a single word from Romans 9. Paul wrote to people who knew the Old Testament better than we do. He could take for granted that they knew certain things that I can’t take for granted that we all know. That’s okay as long as we don’t remain in the dark about the relevant background in the book of Exodus. Let’s try to fix that.

Let’s begin with Exodus 4:21. God has just commissioned Moses to ask Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, to let the people of Israel leave their bondage in Egypt. Verse 21 says: **The Lord said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.”** “Moses, my man, I am commissioning you to do an impossible job, and I’m going to make sure it’s impossible.”

Off goes Moses into the crucible. Things went from bad to worse, and God came back to Moses with the less than encouraging words of Exodus 7:3: **But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you.** And sure enough, Moses performed amazing miracles, and sure enough, Pharaoh was not impressed and did not let the people of Israel go.

Have you ever pulled down your bedspread to go to sleep and found four frogs sitting there croaking at you? The God of Israel did that to the Egyptians, and it was no fun. Pharaoh found frogs in the royal bed and agreed to let Israel go out of Egypt. Verse 15 reports his change of heart, but listen to the difference. **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 happened at the end of chapter 8. This time it was flies. Don’t you love flies sitting on your food while you are eating dinner? The Egyptians didn’t like it

either, and Pharaoh again agreed to let Israel go, if Moses' God would just get rid of the flies. He did, and verse 32: **But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.**

The pattern repeated itself with the next plague, and just when we think we know what will happen, Exodus 9:12 throws us a nasty curve ball. **But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.** Another plague of crop-destroying hail struck Egypt, and Pharaoh seemed positively repentant – **"This time I have sinned,** verse 27 – but when push came to shove, well, you know what happened. But you don't know what was happening inside Pharaoh until you read verse 34. **When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts. So Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the Lord had said.**

We've read six verses that report the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. Three times the Bible says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and three times the Bible says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So, which was it? The Exodus story is no help. The Exodus story is the problem. It is designed to keep us wondering. It is this unresolved story that we need to keep in mind, when we come to the heart of Romans 9.

### **Sinners in the Hands of a Merciful God**

Let's begin with the startling statement in Romans 9:17: **For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up."** "You think you ascended the throne of Egypt because of your royal lineage or your administrative skills. Well, good for you, but something else was at work. I wanted you there, Pharaoh, because I have something in mind that involves you intimately."

Take a moment and listen to something else like that. Isaiah 7:17 reports a devastating message from the Prophet Isaiah to the King of Judah. **The Lord will bring on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike anything you've ever known – he will bring the king of Assyria.** The next verse repeats his warning of invasion, but listen to how the prophet diminished Egypt and Assyria, the superpowers of their day. **In that day the Lord will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria.** When God wants you, He will whistle for you, like a man whistles for his dog. Such are heads of state in the eyes of Almighty God.

Here's another example. The Persian Empire overwhelmed the Babylonians and was centered in what is present-day Iran. They ruled an enormous landmass from the eastern end of the Mediterranean to territories in Southern Asia. Their King Cyrus comes into the biblical story in Isaiah 44:28: **I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself (v. 24) . . . who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please.**

Heads of state, who strut around with the fate of millions in their hands, are prone to forget who put them there; and the One who put them there just might choose to display His power in them in order that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Let them consider Pharaoh of old and tremble.

Romans 9:18 might make us all tremble. **Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.** Oh, boy! This is tough. God acts on certain people so that they will refuse what is best for them. How do we make sense of that?

We begin by reading verse 15 again. This verse quotes Exodus 33:19, which “comes closer than anywhere else in the Jewish scriptures to revealing the innermost nature of God.” (James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16*, 562) God said to Moses: **“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”** Before you question the justice of God, you should remember that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart for the same reason He chose Abraham. He does it to extend mercy to ever-widening circles of humanity. Remember verse 17: **“I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” In all the earth.** Hardening, which is the dark side of election, is not God’s unfair way of excluding people. It is God’s way of making sure that mercy will prevail in this world. If you miss that, you miss Paul’s meaning.

But we can say more. Earlier, we saw that three times the Bible says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and three times the Bible says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So, which was it? I believe Exodus says it both ways as a subtle reminder that we are in the presence of mystery. Is there any greater mystery than how the freedom of God and the freedom of Man work together? Exodus clearly leaves God in control, and just as clearly Exodus takes nothing away from human responsibility. Romans 10 will give human responsibility a generous hearing.

And we can say more. Let me ask you a very blunt question: Did Pharaoh go to hell? The right answer is, “I don’t know.” I ask that blunt question, because that’s where the traditional understanding of election takes you. Remember: three ideas express the traditional understanding. First, God’s act of election took place before God created the world. Second, the object of election was the individual. Third, the purpose of election was to determine who will be saved and who will be damned at the final judgment. The traditional doctrine applies to everyone who ever lives on the earth. It’s easy to read Romans nine with this doctrine in mind and conclude that Pharaoh went to hell, because God hardened his heart.

The understanding of election that I am proposing to you takes that conclusion off the table. First, God’s act of election takes place within history. Second, the object of election is the community of faith that began with Abraham. Third, the purpose of election is for that community to embody and carry forward God’s purpose in the world. His purpose is to bless all the nations of the earth through Jesus Christ.

By making election a matter of this world, it leaves the very real salvation and damnation of mankind where it belongs: with the wisdom of God on the Great Day of Judgment that is just around the corner; and it leaves open the possibility of Pharaoh’s repentance later on.

### **A Hard Question**

But there is still a problem with hardening Pharaoh’s heart. Paul raised it, and I admire his integrity for doing so. Verse 19: **“Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?”** “If God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, there wasn’t much Pharaoh could do about it. So, why blame him for his actions?” There are two answers. The apostle gave one of them in verses 20-21, and this one carries the greatest weight. I’d like to give an extension to his answer, whose value you can judge for yourself.

The apostle wrote this: **“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?**

If you think heaven and hell were at stake when God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then sending Pharaoh to hell for something he had no control over will prompt the question of verse 19 over and over. But if what was at stake in Pharaoh's moment of truth was extending God's mercy to ever-widening circles of humanity, then you begin to see how the hardness of God really might be kinder than the softness of men.

That's where my answer takes Paul's answer one step further. Paul compared God to a potter and people to the pottery God makes out of the same lump of humanity. Paul learned that way of talking from the Old Testament prophets. One of them suggests that God's action does not take away from human responsibility.

Jeremiah 18:5-6: **Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."** Jeremiah was using the same imagery that Paul later used. Now, look what Jeremiah did with it.

The Lord still speaks in verses 7-8: **"If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned."** Calling people clay in the hand of God does not diminish human freedom.

Verses 9-10 drives home the peril of freedom. **"If at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it."** The killing in Colorado reminds us that freedom can produce a very hard heart indeed.

### **Harden Not Your Hearts**

I have asked a lot from you in this sermon. You have responded with patience and grace. Thank you. Agreeing with me is hardly what matters. Seeking God and knowing Him is what matters now and always. If these deep matters have helped you to do that, it's been a good day. These deep matters also hit close to home. Here's how.

A sadness about the Brandywine Valley, the home I love, falls upon my heart from time to time. Thousands of people in this valley, a few minutes' drive from here will not darken the door of a church. They have Sunday School, Christian and Parochial school, CCD classes, and maybe years of worshiping in a local church as their heritage. They claim not to be hostile to Christ, but they stay away in droves.

Some left in an explosion of anger, but most like a boat that has lost power, have simply drifted away from the Church. They are not passing their heritage on to their children, and they have no idea how close they are to the white water and waterfall ahead. It is possible to drift into a hardness of heart that rejects Christ. We saw evidence of the drift last week, not only in the Colorado killing, but also when people responded to the killing by calling for gun control and said nothing about calling back to God.

Congregations of the elect like this one are lights along the river. My message to those who are drifting away from God, if they would but listen, and my message to us is this: **Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts** – Hebrews 3:7. Don't refuse God. Don't drift away from Him. Let us stay close to each other and encourage each other, and invite our friends to join us in worshiping the living and true God.