

Sermon 126: Romans 11:7-10: Sovereign Hardening

OUTLINE

An explanation of the hardening
A description of the hardened

INTRODUCTION

No sober-minded Christian would deny that God is sovereign. Every Christian would affirm that God is sovereign, all powerful and actively in control in the world today. But there are three areas where there are differences of opinion between believers. Christians differ over what extent God controls nature; the extent of God's control over evil, and the extent of God's control in salvation and damnation. The verses we are presently studying are driving us into the heart of the differences about who is in control when it comes to salvation and damnation. Today we have to attend again to the matter of God sovereignly hardening sinners. Let us read Romans 11:7-10.

The doctrine of God hardening sinners, the doctrine of reprobation, the doctrine of preterition, this is what is forced upon us this morning. Paul is confronting us with the sovereignty of God in hardening sinners. Calvin versus Arminius; Luther versus Erasmus; Whitefield versus Wesley; Pelagius versus Augustine, this is the fighting arena into which we are now thrust as we seek to come to grips with what the bible says on this issue. Let me point out as we begin that I had no plan to preach on this issue this morning, but that the text determined the topic for us. This is indeed the beauty of following the practice of expository preaching, where we follow the flow of the bible as we preach through it verse by verse. Only those who love the conflict would deliberately choose to preach on such difficult matters, but we are grateful that we are forced to deal with every word of God as good and helpful in equipping as to honour God.

Paul as you well know has been talking about God's will in saving Israel. He has already knocked our socks off and challenged our assumptions by revealing that God's perfect will for Israel's salvation is coming to pass even though many of the first century Jews have rejected their own Messiah because God never intended to save every Jew, but an elect from them. Paul stresses God's sovereign prerogative to have mercy on whom He will have mercy and to harden whom He will harden, this is the emphatic teaching of 9:6-23. But Paul also tells us how though God is completely sovereign in who is saved, the Israelites are still very much responsible for their unbelief, this he proves at length in chapter 10. Paul has just alerted us again to the fact that God has a plan for Israel, and it is to save a remnant by grace. 11:7-10, the verses before us act as a type of summary of all that he has said in the last three chapters. This can be deduced from the opening words of v7, 'what then?' Paul is saying what should we conclude from what has said so far. Here are his conclusions. Firstly, a general statement that he will later qualify, 'Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.' This is a general statement which makes it appear as if Israel has not been saved because all that it was seeking, in other words, all that it was seeking to do for itself for salvation produced nothing. But Paul makes some clarifying points, 'the elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.' Here we have a plain statement of double predestination, where God is actively involved in both salvation and unbelief. We have already explored how God saves a remnant according to grace, today we have to look at the other side of the coin and the issue of hardening. We will look at two things in the text: firstly, the mechanics of hardening, and secondly, the phenomena; an explanation and description.

An explanation of the hardening

The question we are forced to confront from our text is, how are the unbelievers hardened? The simple answer that the text gives us is that God hardened them. This is established by the words, 'the rest were hardened,' and 'God gave them a spirit of stupor.' In the context of chapters 9-11, we must recall 9:18, 'So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.' As soon as we see that this is the clear teaching of the text this brings to mind certain difficult questions: Can a God of love will not to love all; Is God the author of sin, namely unbelief; Isn't double predestination Hyper-Calvinism? Many are happy to affirm the sovereignty of God in salvation as He saves us by grace, but it is biblical teaching of God sovereign over the hardening of the unbeliever that causes many to stumble and withdraw from the whole discussion. There are several things we need to say.

Firstly, we need to make things worse before we can make them better, let us see most clearly that this is indeed the teaching of the bible and not an anomaly from a single text. The bible plainly speaks of God's sovereignty over unbelief: Proverbs 16:4, 'The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.' John 12:37-40, 'Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, 38 so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.' Here we can plainly see that both Jesus and Paul have the same view of God's sovereignty over unbelief. Regarding Judas' unbelief Jesus speaks about the certainty of it by prophecy, John 13:18, 'I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' 1 Peter 2:7-8, 'So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.' Jude 4, 'For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.' And of course, Rom. 9:13, 18, 'As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" 'For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.' This is just the tip of the iceberg which shows God to be sovereign, even over unbelief.

I hope you can see that this is not just a verse or two but the common way of speaking in scripture. This raises the question of whether God is the author of sin. Here is how I would answer this question. Firstly, the bible makes many bald assertions, that is assertions without explanations. For example, we all know of Samson's sinful desire for Philistine women and his disobedience in marrying one of them. But listen to how the scripture seeks for us to understand Samson's sin, Judges 14:3-4, 'But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes." His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.' Here is a bald assertion, 'it was from the LORD,' what was, the desire for the woman? Impossible, God tempts no one, but the bible is seeking for us to understand that God is working out His purposes out against the Philistines, even

through Samson's sin. Samson is wrong, Samson is sinful, Samson shouldn't do it, but it is God's will. Are you confused yet? Bald assertion without mechanical explanation is common, for there is no thought in the writer's mind of indicting God and making Him appear guilty.

Many have read this and said, the bible contradicts itself, but this is nonsense. You and I in the west have benefitted from the long history of western thought including Greek philosophy. You and I think in terms of first and second causes, but many things in the bible were written before the birth of Aristotle who came up with the categories of first and second causes. Many assertions which the bible makes we can now account for with the help of this category. In the minds of the authors of the bible there was no tension, they were not saying God is holy and directly willing and ordering sin. Now we can now see that they understood second causes without articulating them. For example, the event of David counting the fighting men, 2 Sam. 24:1, 'Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah.'" 1 Chron. 21:1, 'Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.' Is this a contradiction? Never! God willed to allow Satan to tempt David. God had a purpose to bring judgement on Israel and David and this is how He did it.

When it comes to God being sovereign and His will and power upholding His will to harden the unbeliever, we must realise the way the bible makes these assertions. The example we have from Paul is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. This truth of God hardening Pharaoh's heart is mentioned about ten times, Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8. We would say that God did not cause His word through Moses to be accompanied by the Spirit for faith, but that Pharaoh was left in His unbelief. This is an act of justice against a sinner, and an act that is sovereignly ordained by God to be brought to pass but not without the use of secondary means, not by doing any violation to the will of the creature, and without God being the author of sin. Now the common comeback is that the Scripture says Pharaoh hardened his own heart, this is found about 4 times Ex. 7:13; 8:32 (28); 9:34. This is usually introduced as a way of denying that God is sovereign in who He hardens. We do not think that this is the necessary conclusion. We believe that God is always in control over everything that ever comes to pass, but also uses secondary means and without violating the will of the creature. So that although we see Pharaoh hardening his own heart, this was all revealed to Moses prophetically before it happened in Ex. 4:21, 'And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.'" Paul quotes Ex. 9:16 which occurs after the 6th plague, and this does not mean that Paul forgot that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, or that he is denying that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but rather that God's will was to harden Pharaoh's sinful heart not by direct means but simply by allowing Pharaoh's natural unbelief to go uncontested by the Spirit. Both God and man were willing their own wills, but man's will was always controlled to the end that God's sovereignty ordains without violating man's will, and without God being the author of sin.

In theology we call this concurrence, we see God's will and man's will being exercised simultaneously without one cancelling out the other, but God's will is ultimately sovereign and His will is fulfilled, this however does not violate man's will, and God using secondary

means is not the author of sin.

We have spoken about this in terms of a passive judicial hardening. In other words, God does not put unbelief into the heart of someone but is passive and does nothing to stir up faith. It is judicial not because God is being cruel or vindictive, but passes over those who are sinners and do not deserve to be saved. The result is hardening, but it is a case of the sinner hardening his own heart. We have used the illustration of clay being left to itself as an illustration of the tendency of man's heart to run from God not to Him, to naturally sprout unbelief and pride not faith and humility. Man does it to himself but only because God sovereignly allows it, and we say that God wills what He allows, and in this way is not the author of sin, does not force the will of the creature, and all this by second causes.

Although we believe in double predestination we believe in asymmetrical double predestination. What this means is that we recognise that the bible teaches that God works His sovereignty in a different way in salvation than He does in hardening. When he saves God according to mercy/grace comes to a dead sinner and enables them to do what is not within their nature to do, to believe and repent. He actively and personally by His Spirit works inwardly to give a new disposition that results in a new obedience to the gospel. We would use words like actively, not passively, directly, not indirectly, immediately and not mediately, as a first cause not using second causes to describe His activity. Many think that we approach the teaching on hardening in the same way not realising that the bible teaches a different way of God's working. God does not come to us and put a heart of unbelief just as He would put a new heart in someone who is to be saved. He does not come and intervene and interrupt the path of life that they were on like He does to us in salvation. God leaves the sinner to their sinfulness, He lets them have all they want according to the sinful desires of their hearts. They will not choose Christ because they will harden their own hearts against Him. We have all felt this process. You sin in a certain for the first time and you are mortified and feel deep guilt, but you have crossed the line and the second time you do not feel so bad, and you get harder and harder. Hebrews 3:13 talks about being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. All God has to do is nothing and you are the author of your own hardness of heart. This is a fearful thing, and it is not felt for it involves the removal of conscience, the removal of fear and growing more calloused to the things of God. God is sovereign over unbelief for there will be no unbelief unless God wills it, but He is not the author of unbelief, we are. He passively and judicially hardens. This perspective answers many but not all questions. We are not granted access to God's eternal counsels and given an explanation as to why He chose to pass over some. We can know that it was nothing in us, but we are not given access to the inner workings of Gods heart. We must accept our finitude, our creaturely position of submitting where we don't understand and refuse to doubt the goodness of God which is clearly demonstrated in the cross. We talk of passive judicial hardening, asymmetrical double predestination, God willing what He allows, God using second causes, all to seek for a God honouring way to affirm as the scripture teaches that God is sovereign over the hardening of hearts.

A description of the hardened

This really is one of the most important principles you can learn to understand God's dealings with man. Do you want to understand the present state of the world and God's involvement in it, understand how God's hardens hearts, according to Romans 1 He hands us over to our debased minds. He allows us to pursue all our hearts desires and to reap the consequences of our actions as judgement. Western society with its moral decline can only be understood by Christians if they comprehend that for those who suppress the truth of God, God acts by handing us over to our sinfulness.

Paul describes the hardened to us by appealing to 3 OT texts. This action of appealing to the OT is to give authority to the statement that God saved a remnant by grace and that God hardened the rest. Paul conflates Deut. 29:4 and Is. 29:10; and then quotes from Ps. 69:22-23. Look at the descriptions and tell me whether this is a penetrating analysis of the unbelieving person.

'Seeking'. Paul has already told us that no one seeks God no not one, so then what is he referring to here. Paul explains in 10:2-3, 'For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.' In other words hardness of heart looks like being religious and trying to be righteous before God with strenuous law keeping but not trusting in Christ. Does this surprise you? If you are informed by the spirit of this age this will not sit well. We are taught by our pluralistic society to look upon sincere effort as merit. We privately entertain the thought that God will see their sincerity and effort and will save them somehow. If this is how you think you are thinking in terms of congruent merit, and you are failing to see religion without Christ as a judgement not a way to heaven. Here is the best religion on earth with the most information, but without Christ it is a judgement to them.

'God gave them a spirit of stupor.' The word stupor indicates a kind of deep sleep where we are oblivious to our surroundings. Think of this as a description of the Jews. John the Baptist arrives and prophesies about the Messiah, then Jesus comes and performs miracles for three and a half years, including raising the dead. Dies and then resurrects and vibrant church of willing martyr witnesses arises testifying to the truth of it. Yet the Jews refused to believe. They saw everything around them but if God does not open their eyes, they are given eyes that do not see. And even though they heard the words of Jesus from His own mouth speaking of His having come down from above, apart from God granting the ability to understand they were given ears that do not hear. In our present age we could talk about the obvious evidence from creation, the arguments of irreducible complexity and intelligent design, the bible true teachings on man's sin, man's value, man's identity. All those who have come to believe will know how you look at those who do not believe and are amazed at the recalcitrance of their unbelief and the hopelessness of their existence, they are hardened.

Now let me be clear, this does not mean they are lost, we were all hardened until we were saved. There are those who God will permanently pass over for salvation but all sinners are in a hardened state until saved. We do not know who they are and so we promiscuously preach the gospel to all trusting in God to call His elect. We will see in the case of the elect Jews that they are hardened temporarily in order that the Gentiles might be saved and then by means of the Gentiles the elect Jews will in turn be saved.

Paul quotes not only from the law and the prophets but the psalms as well, from Ps. 69:22-23 in Rom. 11:9-10. This is a psalm of David called an imprecatory psalm, that is a psalm calling for justice against the enemies of God's people. We must always read these words calling for eye for eye justice as spoken by the Spirit foreshadowing Christ's future role as the judge-king. But there are two things that stand out in these verses. Firstly we see that David prays that their table will become their snare and their means of retribution. In other words, David is asking that the blessings that God has granted will become the means by which they are hardened. An obvious example is the one we face in the consumeristic entertainment pleasure dome in the West. We have luxuries, freedom, democracy, wealth, diversions, attractions, ease, play, and many other things that in and of themselves are good gifts of God. But these gifts in the hands of sinners become idols, weapons, tools employed

for self not God. Other good gifts like family, marriage, work, rest, and many other good things too in the hands of man apart from the Spirit take the place of the Creator and become what we use for significance, purpose, identity, and the centre for determining moral norms. When God seeks to judge us, these good things become the snares, He allows our hearts to take temporal things and treat them as ultimate things.

This was the problem of the Jews, they had the bible, they had the covenants, the fathers, the temple, circumcision, the worship of the temple, etc. Their religion became their trap. They were seeking to establish their own righteousness and not accept the righteousness that comes from God as a free gift through faith in Christ. They could not accept their helplessness, their sinfulness, that those things they had prided themselves in like their nationality and the gifts God had given them had become their security. So that when they were confronted with the truth they rejected the Messiah and murdered Him. Whenever God judges His people Israel He always does it as an object lesson. He seeks to defend His own glory and make an example of them. We must take heed of this. Are you sure that Christ is your only confidence for salvation? Are you trusting in something else? Even well run, well worked out religion, with all the trappings of hundreds of years of tradition, beautiful buildings and the world's respect for good morality were not enough to save the Jews from taking God's gifts and scorning the Creator.

When God sought to judge the Jews for their sins, when He sought to leave them to themselves, they did not become profligates they became religious hypocrites. Self-deceived religious hypocrites who thought they did not need the gift of Christ's righteousness but kept to thinking they would ultimately get themselves into heaven. The bars of their prison were religion, self-satisfaction, and self-sufficiency. And with minds unaided by the Spirit they read and heard and only confirmed their previous beliefs, never able to learn apart from God's intervention.

Now many people hear a message about God's sovereign hardening and think to themselves, this is a most unhelpful message. I do not apologise, it is taught in the bible and so I must teach it. Some might think, but it could be so destructive what about those poor souls who are not saved who are hearing this message and think to themselves, I cannot believe, for God is judging me, He is hardening me, I am doomed. Let me say a word to this sort of person. It is wrong headed to try and discern God's hidden will, in other words His will of who is elect and who is not. It is not our job, nor does He call upon us to find out His hidden counsels. He has commanded you to repent and believe. SO on the basis of the commands of Scripture and the authority of scripture, if you see yourself a sinner in need of mercy, in need of righteousness that only God can give, then come to Christ. Come in faith trusting that He has done it all and enough to make you holy before God. Trust that His death is enough to pay for your sins so that you need not hold to anything else but God's sufficient provision in Christ. Then believe the promise of the word that anyone who believes will receive eternal life, or that anyone who comes to Him He will not cast out.

How do we apply a message such as this one? Firstly, a portion like this teaches us not to fear the hard verses of the bible and teaches us to come to grips with the bald assertions without explanation that we find in Scripture. All scripture is useful and we must not fear any part of it, even those disputed parts. Secondly, grappling with this issue reminds us of the limits of revelation and our ability to reason. We are taught to refuse to judge God live by faith in what is revealed and submit where we do not understand. This lesson of humility is necessary often as we tend to push the boundaries. Thirdly, realising how God works in society teaches us discernment as we look at the sin and how it is on the increase in society.

We cannot have a neutral view of western culture we have to see that God is in the process of judging it and the nature of our blessings can be snares to a heart that does not have the Spirit. This is not an excuse to avoid these gifts but to keep ourselves close to God that they do not harden our hearts. Finally, knowing that the Lord is the one who has all the power to open the hearts of the unbeliever this should give us a confidence to preach, for we are weak and our arguments are often terrible, but ultimately it is God who saves and so we can share with others confident that God is powerful where we are not.