

KEEP THY HEART

A Bible-Based Devotional

Turn to: **Romans 9:17-33**
“Why God's Hardening Is Just”

1: Attitude: Blaming God for your sin is most arrogant (v17-20a). Long before Israel's exodus from Egypt, **Pharaoh** already had a wicked heart against God. God **raised** him **up** in this state and *hardened* him in it—i.e., made him brazen and obstinate in his *existing* sin (Deuteronomy 2:30), which prior he often hid with deceit—so that the whole world would see who he really was, against his selfish better judgment and common sense (see Proverbs 26:26). God orchestrated these events to **exalt His own name** and **show His power in** Pharaoh (Proverbs 16:9) and bring due judgment upon Egypt. **(v18)** We *all* deserve to be **hardened** in our sin like Pharaoh, and we escape only by God's **mercy** (Revelation 22:11).

(v19) But people like Pharaoh **will say**, “If God made me do it, and if He gets glory from it, **why does he still find fault?** Wasn't it God's **will** that I sinned and didn't let Israel go? I did Him a favor, really.” It's similar to the question Paul addresses earlier in Romans 3:5-8, except this time, with a twist: it blames *God* for the sin. It wrongly caricatures God, much the same way that Calvinism caricatures Him in my opinion. God's will was for Pharaoh to *reveal* his sinful heart, not for him to have a sinful heart in the first place.

(v20) Paul starts by rebuking the sinner's attitude. How proud for a **man to reply against God** with such a spirit! Wicked men often blame the victims of their crimes, which is bad enough; but to blame God Himself for their sin against Him? That is the height of arrogance. Where is any contrition? Distorted doctrine often stems from a proud spirit.

2: Wisdom: The creator's qualities surpass the creation's (v20b). Pharaoh evidently resented God for shaping (or **forming**) his sinful heart to pull away the cloak hiding his sin. If only God had left him alone, Pharaoh would have had the sense to let Israel

go much earlier, and Egypt would have avoided most of the economic devastation from those plagues. Why did God **make** Pharaoh **thus**, unyielding in his wickedness, blind to common sense and selfish motive? Isn't that invasive and unfair of God? Further, with this question, Paul is alluding to Old Testament texts, where the questioners accuse God of incompetence and ignorance (Isaiah 45:9; 10:13-15; 29:13-17).

A bully might say, “I'm bigger than you, so shut up.” Of course, God is not like that. His point here is that as our Creator, He is of necessity superior to us *in every way*. He is not only *bigger*, but stronger, wiser, more genuinely loving, more compassionate, more creative, and having a *better and higher* sense of justice and equity than is inscribed on our God-given consciences (Romans 2:14-15). We can have faith He will never stoop below us in any good quality.

Further, God always remains faithful to His character. It would be one thing if we were talking about a “madman” inventor who likes to create things just to blow them up, or who enjoys making creations to see them suffer. But instead, we're talking about *God*, Who is entirely beautiful and pure. We're talking about Someone strong enough to carve the mountains, but also clever enough to craft the hummingbird's wing; compassionate enough to sit with every hurting sparrow that falls to the ground; sentimental enough to ordain the crimson sunsets; tender enough to make the gentle evening breeze; and caring enough to weep with those that weep (John 11:35). His Word says He *loves* righteousness (Psalm 11:7), or having everything so wonderfully *right*. He loves *equity*, not preferring one above another (Psalm 98:9; Isaiah 59:14; I Timothy 5:21; James 2:9). And He loves the whole world so much that He sent His only Son to die for us all (John 3:16). When we don't understand why God does or allows certain things, we can have absolute faith that He will remain forever faithful to His beautiful character.

3: Ethnicity: Hardening is not based on lineage (v21). Paul alludes to Jeremiah 18, where the potter begins forming a clay vessel that becomes marred in his hand. And so he starts over, making something else with that clay, as he sees fit. God explains the point: He is

the Potter, and Israel is the clay, and the type of vessel they become depends on the response of the *clay*—their repentance or lack of it—and not on the Potter's whim. What an important point! Paul extends this analogy to *individuals*, explaining that God also has the right to make different kinds of vessels from **the same lump**, based on their *individual* response. That is, God can make beautiful **vessels of honor** from the Jewish clay, but also **vessels of dishonor** from the same lump of clay (see v24). He can do the same with the dark clay of Ethiopia, the light clay of Rome, the yellow clay of Asia, the red clay of the Americas, and all others. God's heavenly "shelves," so to speak, will be filled with beautiful vessels of all colors! Our physical lineage does not matter to God, but only our individual response to His influence, either in faith or unbelief.

4: Vindication: God wants His wrath to publicly make sense (v22). Since God knew all the evil that would result, why did He go ahead and create free will? We can rest assured that God knows what He is doing and has a plan, and is not afraid but **willing to show His wrath, and to make his power known**. However, to show *wrath* properly, He must also show the *justification* for that wrath. Otherwise, it looks like plain meanness, or like petty overreaction. This is one reason why God shows **much longsuffering with the vessels of wrath**, not punishing them as soon as He justly could. (Another reason is to give them a chance to repent, II Peter 3:9). He **endures** their evil, which is loathsome in His sight, as He **fits** them **to destruction**, by shaping and hardening their hearts to bring out their hidden vileness into public view. Once God is ready, unless they repent first, judgment will then come; and by God's wisdom in letting evil run its course to an extent, God's wrath will not only be *just*, but completely *vindicated* before all. Everyone will genuinely understand why hell is the right punishment for devils and for *all* of us sinners apart from God's mercy; and those in hell will be unable to act as though they are unjustly the victims of God's wrath. (see Romans 3:4)

5: Mercy: We are all sinners and deserve to be hardened (v23). We *all* deserve to be hardened and judged for our sin, and it is only by God's **mercy** that any of us are

not. God uses all things, even the evil of this world, to **prepare us unto glory** (II Corinthians 4:17). If God glorified us prematurely, before we were ready, it wouldn't be nearly as exciting as if He prepared us for it **beforehand**. He is forming us, perfecting us, and putting all the final touches in place, so that when His glory flows into us, everything will be absolutely *perfect*! We will shine and glow with His goodness to maximum possible effect, and it will completely overwhelm us in unimaginable joy and happiness forever. Difficult as it often is to recognize at the moment, we can know that God's timing is truly best!

6: Scripture: Election was never by ethnicity (v24-29). Salvation was never by **Jewish** ethnicity, and **Gentiles** were always foreshadowed in the Old Testament as being included, too. As a Gentile myself, I am very thankful. Incidentally, this is the main focus of both preceding questions about pottery (v21 "same lump", and v24), and the point of the entire chapter.

7: Condition: God chooses to harden only for unbelief (v30-33). Finally, for what *reason*, (v32) or **Wherefore**, are some hardened, and not others? We all deserve it, but whom does God choose to harden? The ultimate condition is very simple: *faith versus unbelief*. Those who **seek** righteousness **not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law**, will **stumble at the stumblingstone**, or be hardened by God. And those who place their faith in Jesus Christ will make Him their Cornerstone and will not be ashamed (Matthew 21:42-44).

God's hardening is *always* in response to a prior rejection of the truth in unbelief (Romans 1:21, 24; 25-26; 28; Psalm 81:10-16; II Thessalonians 2:10-12). And His election to salvation has *always* been on the basis of faith. And that's a key part of the good news! It means that *anyone* who wants to come to Jesus Christ in humble faith and repentance can join the host of God's Elect and be saved. And if you do, what a future! I cannot begin to imagine how glorious heaven will be, in large part because of all the work God is doing on us today, to perfectly fit us for such a glorious eternity with Him!