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CHOSEN OR HARDENED?

Romans 11:7-10

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Romans Lesson 68

Chosen or Hardened? Romans 11:7-10

I would venture to say that if Paul had submitted Romans 11:7-10 to an editorial committee from most American churches in our day, it would have come out radically different than he wrote it. Verse 7 would be changed to read, "What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who *believed* have obtained it, while the rest *chose not to believe.*" This talk about God electing or hardening, Paul, is just too controversial! Tone it down!

And verses 8-10, Paul, are just too gloomy and negative. Folks today like a more upbeat message. They want to hear about a God of love, not a God of judgment, who gives people eyes not to see and ears not to hear! That's depressing! So maybe you should just eliminate those verses altogether!

But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul wrote these verses as they stand. We can pretend that they aren't in our Bibles or stumble over them or seek to gain the benefit to our souls that God intended. We dare not fall into the spiritually fatal error of making up a god according to our liking: "I like a loving God, not a God of judgment. I like a God who gives me free will, not a God who sovereignly chooses some for salvation and passes over others in judgment." If you do that, you fall into idolatry. It's crucial to come to know God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, not to tweak Him according to your personal preferences.

Paul is drawing a conclusion from 11:1-6, but especially from the remnant motif that he mentions in those verses. He is dealing with the question of why most Jews were rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Did their unbelief cause God's promises to fail? Did their rejection of Christ mean that God was now through with the Jews forever? No, Paul says, the existence of a remnant of saved Jews shows that God was not done with the nation. Their rejection is partial, not total (11:1-10); it is temporary, not permanent (11:11-32). Their unbelief (or any human sin) cannot thwart God's purpose, which depends on His sovereign grace, not on any human factors at all. The remnant is according to God's gracious

choice (11:5-6), which means that it doesn't depend on any human will or effort (9:16).

Verse 7 is a brief summary of Romans 9 & 10. Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 679, note 45) observes, "It blends the predestinatory focus of 9:6-29—'elect,' 'hardened'—with the human responsibility perspective of 9:30-10:21—'sought,' 'did not attain'—to sum up Paul's discussion of Israel to this point in chaps. 9-11." In other words, those who are saved are saved because God chose to save them. Those who are lost are lost because they refused to repent and believe the gospel. And then, as Paul has frequently done in Romans 9-11, he backs up verse 7 with Scripture to show that he isn't making this up (11:8-10). What Paul says in verse 7 is in line with all of God's Word. He is saying here:

Either you have been chosen by God to hear, understand, and believe the gospel so that you are saved, or you will be hardened and come under His judgment.

Those are the only two possibilities! While this is not easy truth, it is spiritually nourishing for your soul. So ask God to give you insight into this part of His inspired Word. The bulk of the text deals with those who were hardened and came under God's judgment, and so the bulk of this message deals with that.

1. If you seek to obtain right standing with God on the basis of your works, you will be hardened and come under God's terrible judgment.

Most of our text, 11:8-10, is taken from the Old Testament. Paul lets the Bible say the hard things so that no one can accuse Paul of making it up. That's a good plan!

When I began here almost 20 years ago, I preached through 1 Peter. When I came to 1 Peter 3:1-6, I preached what the text says, that wives are to be subject to their own husbands. I tried to explain what Peter meant and did not mean in those verses. A few days later a single young woman came to see me and said, "You shouldn't preach on things like that on Sunday morning!"

I asked her, "Did I misrepresent what the text says?" She replied, "No, you taught what the text says." So I asked, "Did I teach it with a sarcastic or arrogant attitude?" She said, "No, you taught it with the right attitude." So I asked, "Then what was the problem?"

"The problem," she said, "was that I brought a friend to church who is a committed feminist, and she will never come back to church again!"

"Ah," I said, "God has a way of bringing people to church on the very Sunday that they need to hear what His Word declares." I added, "One of two things will happen. Either your friend will be convicted of her worldly, unbiblical views and come to repentance and faith. Or, she will reject the truth that she heard and be hardened in her unbelief. One day she will face God's judgment."

And so if I teach today what these verses do not teach or if I teach with the wrong attitude, please let me know. I need to repent. But if I teach accurately and lovingly what God's Word teaches, then you can't quarrel with me. I'm just the messenger. You're contending with God! Four truths will help us to understand what Paul is saying here:

A. Israel sought righteousness before God on the basis of their works, not on the basis of faith.

Romans 11:7: "What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained" What Israel was seeking, but did not obtain, was right standing with God, or righteousness. Romans 9:30-32 says:

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law. Why? Because *they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works.*

He also adds with reference to the Jews (Rom. 10:2-4):

For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

For the most part, the Jews did not lack sincerity. The Pharisees and Sadducees were hypocrites (Matt. 23:13-33), but the majority of the Jews were sincere in their dedication to their religion. Nor did they lack commitment. They followed the prescribed rituals and laws with dedication that would put most of us to shame.

Nor did they lack zeal. Look at Paul's zeal before he was saved. He went to great lengths to try to keep the Jewish religion pure by eliminating those whom he saw as heretics. But if your religious sincerity, commitment, and zeal are misguided, they will only move you toward judgment with greater speed.

The problem, Paul explained, was that their zeal was not according to knowledge, namely, the knowledge that their own good works could never be good enough to atone for their sins or to commend them to the holy God. And they did not know that Christ was the final and sufficient Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for their sins. And they didn't know that God's way of salvation is by grace through faith, not by works. And so they did not obtain the right standing with God that they were seeking. That leads to the second truth:

- B. If you seek righteousness based on your works, then you don't need a Savior and Christ died in vain.

If people are basically good and with a little effort and self-denial they can get into heaven, then why did Jesus need to die on the cross? While Jesus set a good example for us, that was not the main reason that He came to this earth. Jesus said (Mark 10:45) that He came "to give His life a ransom for many." As He faced the cross, Jesus said (John 12:27), "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour." Jesus came to die for our sins to save us from God's judgment. If we can get into heaven by being good people and doing good deeds, then Jesus died in vain.

- C. If you seek righteousness based on your works, you have not judged your pride, which is the root sin.

The good works route is always wrong, because it allows human pride to play a role in salvation. This is the great danger of religion. People mistakenly think that by going to church or taking communion or giving money to the church or serving in the church or helping the poor or whatever, they will gain entrance into heaven. Martin Luther thought that by joining a monastery and treating his body harshly and confessing his sins and going to mass every day, he could gain right standing with God. But nothing brought peace to his soul. Why not? Because by pursuing salvation by works, he was negating God's grace (Rom. 11:6).

To come to God for grace means that I come as a sinner who does not in any way deserve to be saved. I deserve God's judgment. To come to God by works means that I come with the claim that I'm basically good enough to get into heaven on my own, or at least with just a little help from God. The works approach is shot through with arrogance before God. It does not understand His absolute holiness and it does not understand our wretched sinfulness. Pride is the root sin of all other sins. It is the sin that led Eve to eat the fruit, so that she could be like God. To come to God for grace, we must judge our pride.

Thus Israel sought righteousness before God on the basis of works, not faith. If we could come to God on the basis of works, then we don't need a Savior and Christ died in vain. To attempt to come to God on the basis of works is to be filled with the terrible sin of pride. But now we come to the scary part:

- D. If you seek righteousness based on your works, God will harden you against the truth and bring you to ultimate judgment.

Israel, seeking righteousness by works, not only did not obtain it, but Paul adds (11:7), "the rest [the non-elect] were hardened." *Hardened* is a passive verb. Who hardened them? Verse 8 plainly tells us, "Just as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day.'" That quote combines Isaiah 29:10 and Deuteronomy 29:4. It also reflects Isaiah 6:10, where God is speaking to the prophet, "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed." That text is so important that Jesus cites it in Matthew 13:14-15 (and the parallels, Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10) and in John 12:40; and Paul also cites it to the resistant Jews in Acts 28:26-27.

It refers to God's judicial hardening of the Jews, who had heard so much truth and seen so many demonstrations of God's love and power, but refused to submit to Him. In Deuteronomy 29:2-4, Moses said to all Israel after 40 years in the wilderness,

"You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and all his land; the great trials which your eyes have seen, those great signs

and wonders. Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear."

So even as far back as Moses, Israel had come under this judicial hardening, as seen in their continual grumbling against God and refusal to submit to Him. Later, they followed the idolatry and evil ways of the Canaanites, until finally God sent them into captivity. But even after being restored to the land, they continued to try to approach God by their works, so that they hated the Savior who came and convicted them of their self-righteousness and pride. And so in Paul's day, the nation that had crucified the Savior came under even increased hardening from God that has lasted now for 2,000 years! The frightening words of the Jewish mob that was screaming for Jesus' death have come true (Matt. 27:25), "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"

There are two ways in which we need to understand this judgment where God hardens hearts so that they cannot understand the gospel (I'm indebted here to John Piper, "The Elect Obtained It But the Rest Were Hardened," on desiringGod.org). First, from God's perspective, He is free to act according to His own counsel for His own glory and is not obligated to any creature. As we saw in Romans 9:18, "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." God is not constrained by anything outside of Himself. If He chose to condemn the entire human race without providing a Savior, He would be free and perfectly just to do so. After all, He did this with the angels that fell.

Second, God's hardening of the Jews was punishment for their sins. God did it as "retribution" to them (11:9) because of their disobedient, hard hearts (10:21) and "unbelief" (11:20). Israel had been given much light (9:4-5), but they stubbornly refused to respond to it. So God said in effect, "If you refuse to see, I'll confirm that choice: Be blind. If you refuse to hear, be deaf!" How terrifying, to have God pronounce such judgments against you! And it stems, in the case of the Jews and of many other religious people, from seeking to be righteous by their own works.

We can only look briefly at the specifics of this judgment on those who turn from the light that they have been given. What are the characteristics of those who are under this judicial hardening? I'm going to put it in the second person as a warning to us all.

First, you will be spiritually dull and insensitive, unable to perceive and understand spiritual truth. "God gave them a spirit of stupor." This refers to someone who is half asleep or who has been stunned so that he can't think properly. I have shared the gospel with many people who just couldn't get it, even though it is simple enough for a little child to understand. If you asked them later how a person gets into heaven, they would say, "By being a good person."

Second, your blessings will become a curse. That is the meaning of the quote from Psalm 69:22 (Rom. 11:9), "Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them." A table should be a place of nourishment and blessing, but David prays that it will become a snare for his enemies. God gives many blessings, even to unbelievers: material possessions, food, the joys of married love, children, etc. But if they do not honor God and give thanks to Him, then their foolish hearts will be darkened and these blessings will be a curse that keeps them from the supreme joy of knowing God (Rom. 1:21-32).

Third, you are headed for ultimate and final judgment. Romans 11:10: "Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever." The last word may be translated *continually* (in light of 11:25-26), but it may also refer to God's permanent judgment that will come on the reprobate because they turned away from the light that they had been given. "Bend their backs" may look at bondage to the law. The Jews wanted to establish their own righteousness by works of the law, so they are consigned to that futile pursuit that can never obtain the righteousness that comes by grace through faith (see Acts 15:10-11).

Psalm 69 is a messianic psalm and so these judgments are ultimately aimed, not at David's enemies, but at the enemies of Jesus Christ. Those who seek to be saved by works are really enemies of Christ, because if you can be justified by your works, you make the work of Jesus Christ on the cross of no effect. Any scheme of salvation that does not center on the cross of Christ exalts proud sinners and spits in the face of the Savior who gave Himself to redeem those who were under the curse of the law.

Let's look briefly at the other side: How can you know whether you've been chosen by God?

2. If you have been chosen by God, you will hear, understand, and believe the gospel so that you are righteous before God through faith in Christ alone.

“What Israel [was] seeking” but did not obtain (11:7) was righteousness before God (9:31). Then Paul adds, “but those who were chosen obtained it.” Two brief observations:

- A. The source of our right standing before God does not come from us, but from God’s sovereign choice of us.

“Those who were chosen” is literally, “the election.” Paul could have said, “Those who believe obtained it,” which would be true. Or, he could have said, “The elect obtained it.” But he used a different word, meaning “the election,” a word that “serves to put special emphasis on the action of God as that which is altogether determinative of the existence of the elect” (C. E. B Cranfield, (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark International], 2:548). Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: To God’s Glory* [Zondervan], p. 27) explains that the word Paul used “emphasizes the one who ‘elects’ rather than any choice made by the people and so all the glory is to be given to God alone.”

So the believing remnant of Jews or the believing Gentiles could not boast in their faith, as if they had believed of their own free will or because of their superior intelligence (Paul specifically warns of this in 11:20). Rather, God had every right to condemn us for our sins, but in mercy He chose to save us. It’s all of grace. But, how can we know if we are part of God’s elect?

- B. The result of God’s choosing us is that we have heard, understood, and believed the gospel, which provides right standing with God as His undeserved gift.

A man who left this church years ago because he didn’t believe this teaching once asked me, “How can anyone know if he’s elect?” I replied, “It’s very simple: Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and was raised from the dead and that He saved you by His grace alone? Only the elect believe that truth.” And the Bible is clear that your faith did not cause or obtain God’s grace. If anything of merit in you caused God’s favor, then grace is no longer grace (Rom. 11:6). Rather, Paul plainly says that God’s grace caused your blind eyes and deaf ears to be opened so that you un-

derstood the gospel. God opened your heart to respond so that you believed it. God gave you right standing with Him through Jesus' blood as a gift. So He gets all the glory (see 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

Conclusion

Please note that Paul does not explain his statement in verse 7 or see any need to defend it (except for the Scripture quotations that follow). He just says in passing, "What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened." It reminds me of Acts 13, where Luke reports that some of the Jews responded to Paul's preaching by blaspheming and attacking him (13:45), but many Gentiles (13:48) "began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord." Then Luke adds in passing, "And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." No explanation. No defense. He just states it and moves on.

Have you believed in Jesus Christ? If so, it's because you were appointed to eternal life by God's sovereign election. Do you not yet believe? Don't delay! If you reject the light God has given, you may come under His frightful judicial hardening.

Application Questions

1. Why is a works-oriented approach to salvation so offensive to God? What does this say about most religions?
2. How do you reconcile God's active hardening of the hearts of religious people with His desire that all be saved?
3. If God gives people "eyes to see not and ears to hear not," how can He hold them accountable for not seeing or hearing?
4. Why does Paul here refer to God's election rather than to human faith? What is at stake?

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