

# Abounding Grace Christian Church

## A Study through the Epistle to the Romans – Part 25

### I. Exposition of Chapter Nine (Continued).

#### A. Verses 14-18 – God’s Mercy and Hardening.

1. Verse 14 – “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!” In this verse, Paul as he often does, anticipates an objection that might be made by the Jews. How can God choose people before they were born? Well, the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that there is no unrighteous act with God. God is just in all of His dealings and cannot do anything that is inconsistent with His character, and His moral attributes cannot be violated. (cf. Deuteronomy 32:4).
2. Verse 15 – “For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.’” (Quote from Exodus 33:19).

##### a. Definition of words:

- 1) “Mercy” – “to feel sympathy with the misery of another, especially such sympathy which manifests itself in action, less frequently in word.”; “implying not merely a feeling for the misfortunes of others involving sympathy but also an active desire to remove those miseries.”<sup>1</sup>
- 2) “Compassion” – “to bear with”; “to suffer with”.
- 3) Thayer suggests that “mercy” means to feel sympathy with misery of another, which manifests in action, while “compassion” here is more about an inward feeling of compassion which abides in the heart.

- ##### b. The context of this verse is important for understanding. It was at Mt. Sinai and the giving of the law. While Moses was with the Lord, the people made an idol of a golden calf and corrupted themselves in sin. When Moses came down, God said to Moses, “...let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.” (Exodus 32:10). Moses prayed for the people and eventually there was repentance from sin. John Lennox writes:

**“Because of Israel’s sin at this juncture of history, God would have been justified in destroying them. They did not deserve pardon, but in His mercy and compassion God gave it to them...The incident we have just remembered involves Moses pleading and the people mourning and showing evidence of repentance.”<sup>2</sup>**

- ##### c. This lines up with the rest of Scripture which reveals that God is merciful and compassionate to those who repent of their sin.

**“But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting On those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children’s children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them.” Psalm 103:17-18. (See also Psalm 106:1)**

3. Verse 16 - “So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.” – Mercy from God doesn’t come just because a person wants His mercy or because of human exertion. (The word “runs” means; “to exert one’s self; strive hard; to spend one’s strength in performing or attaining something.”<sup>3</sup>)

**“So then [God’s gift] is not a question of human will and human effort, but of God’s mercy. [It depends not on one’s own willingness nor on his strenuous exertion as in running a race, but on God’s having mercy on him.]”**

**Romans 9:16 – Amplified Bible**

#### 4. Verses 17-18 - The example of Pharaoh.

- ##### a. Verse 17 – “For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose, I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.’” – (Quote from Exodus 9:16).

- 1) Pharaoh is responsible for his own choices. God, in His foreknowledge, uses Pharaoh’s arrogant, stubborn personality to accomplish His will for Israel.
- 2) Note it doesn’t say God “created” Pharaoh for this purpose, it simply states that He “raised (him) up”.

- ##### b. Verse 18 – “Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.” – The word “hardens” means; “to be rendered obstinate or stubborn.”

- 1) Note the following:

a) Pharaoh’s heart grew hard – Exodus 7:13.

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm’s Wilke’s Clavis Novi Testamenti*

<sup>2</sup>John Lennox, *Determined to Believe?*. (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2017), 255.

<sup>3</sup>Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm’s Wilke’s Clavis Novi Testamenti*

- b) Pharaoh's heart is hard – **Exodus 7:14.**
  - c) Pharaoh's heart grew hard – **Exodus 7:22.**
  - d) Pharaoh hardened his heart – **Exodus 8:15.**
  - e) Pharaoh's heart grew hard – **Exodus 8:19.**
  - f) Pharaoh hardens his heart – **Exodus 8:32.**
  - g) Pharaoh's heart became hard – **Exodus 9:7.**
  - h) Now it states that that God hardened his heart – **Exodus 9:12.** We should not think that God persuaded an unwilling, kind-hearted Pharaoh to be hard towards God and His people. In hardening the heart of Pharaoh, God simply allowed his heart to pursue its natural inclination. Pharaoh deserved it!!
  - i) Pharaoh hardened his own heart again – **Exodus 9:34.**
  - j) God hardened him – **Exodus 10:1.**
- 2) **“When we look at the nature of the plagues, it is clear that they took about a year to run their course. This shows that the Egyptians were dealing with a God who was patient and had staying power.”<sup>4</sup>**
- 3) **“The fact that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart occurs not once but many times implies that he was softer and more responsive at times: God did not harden Pharaoh's heart once and for all, such that it was hard from then on. Far from it; we read of Pharaoh repeatedly asking Moses and Aaron to pray for him, and on several occasions he confesses his sin.”<sup>5</sup>**
- 4) **“The same sun that melts also hardens.”<sup>6</sup>**
5. Verses 19-21 – **The Divine Potter.**
- a. **Verse 19 – “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?’”** NOTE: Remember, these are questions potentially made by Jews.
- 1) Again, Paul is attempting to anticipate any questions or challenges. First, it's important to point out that the Bible makes it very clear that it is possible to resist the will of God. (cf. **Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:51.**)
- b. **Verse 20 – “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”**
- 1) Paul replies by showing how disrespectful such a question is. If God says He chooses, and if God also says that we are responsible before Him, then that is the way it is. It's important to remember that God sees the whole picture and we only **“know in part” (I Corinthians 13:9-12)**
  - 2) **Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”**  
Paul introduces the picture of the potter and clay with a quotation from **Isaiah 29:16** and **45:9**. **It must be remembered that this is an analogy.**
    - a) Calvinists will claim that the lump of clay is a reference to all humanity, completely hardened by a condition called **“Total Inability”**. They will argue that mankind has as much control over how they believe and behave as a piece of clay has over its own shape.
    - b) However, it seems more Scriptural to see the lump of clay as Israel which has been Paul's topic since the very first verse of this chapter.

**“Generally speaking, Israel was a hell-bound lump of clay that had already grown calloused in self-righteous, legalistic religiosity (Acts 28:21-28). Despite their rebellion, the gracious Potter had patiently held out His hands to them for generations (Rom. 10:21). At times throughout Israel's history, God shows mercy to calloused Israelites in order to fulfill His promise (Ex. 32-33), and at times He hardens them for the same purpose (Rom.9-11). At this time in history, despite the rebellion of Israel, the Divine Potter selects a portion from this spoiled lump of clay to carry His redemptive message to the rest of the world. This is to ensure His purpose for electing Israel will stand (Rom.9:11). The Potter remakes some of this lump for the noble purpose of carrying His Word to the rest of the world. He uses persuasive signs, like a blinding light, to mold the wills of these otherwise rebellious messengers from Israel. He leaves the rest of this already-calloused lump in their rebellion, through which he accomplishes ignoble but necessary and redemptive purposes. Even still, the Potter holds out hope of their being provoked and grafted back in (Rom. 11:11-23).”<sup>7</sup>**

<sup>4</sup>Michael A. Harbin, *The Promise and the Blessing: A Historical Survey of the Old and New Testaments*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2005), 129.

<sup>5</sup>John Lennox, *Determined to Believe?*. (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2017), 263.

<sup>6</sup>Kevin J. Conner, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 307.

<sup>7</sup>Leighton Flowers, *The Potter's Promise: A Biblical Defense of Traditional Soteriology*, (Trinity Academic Press, 2017), 134-135.