

Romans 9:17-18 The Justice of God

Paul's Illustrations 2: Pharaoh and the Exodus

In the light of God's elective purposes, Paul asks, *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!* (Romans 9:14). Paul gives two illustrations to demonstrate the justice of God, although the outcomes are very different. In the first, from Exodus 33:19, Israel is forgiven and God is revealed to be more than just: He is merciful. Nevertheless, we should note there are also consequences for Israel's sin. In the second illustration, from Exodus 9:16, Pharaoh is not forgiven, and God is revealed to be just, measure for measure. Nevertheless, God also exercises mercy in His longsuffering, giving Pharaoh ample time to repent.

While God is sovereign and utterly free in the demonstration of His mercy, we must note that this does not absolve human beings of personal responsibility. As Paul himself says, *God will render to each one according to his works* (see Romans 2:6-11).

So let us look at Paul's second illustration: *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." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills* (Romans 9:17-18). Why does Paul use this verse from Exodus 9:16? It suits his purpose because it illustrates both God's sovereignty and his justice. The verse is part of the great saga of the plagues on Egypt and the Exodus. It is about God's justice against human sin and rebellion, in this case personified in the person of Pharaoh, who actually set himself up as god.

Unless we should be considering that God is unjust, we should remember the words of journalist H.L. Mencken, *Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice*. Pharaoh would feel the sting of God's justice, and except for God's mercy, so would each one of us (Romans 3:23).

Paul's quote comes just before the 7th plague, the plague of hail. In the Exodus story, God appears to Moses in the burning bush and calls him to lead His people out of Egypt. Moses gives five not so good reasons why God couldn't possibly mean him! In the end God sends Aaron to help and to speak for Moses. As they enter Pharaoh's court for the first time, God warns Moses and Aaron that Pharaoh won't listen, because God will *harden Pharaoh's heart* (see Exodus 7:1-4).

On a first reading this does not seem like justice! In fact it can seem like, in the words of one commentator, that God *is playing a cosmic game where an arbitrary God plays on weak human inabilities to satisfy his own hunger for power!* But we need to read the text carefully, and things are not always as simple as they seem! And before we start feeling sorry for Pharaoh we should remember that as a dictator over a regime of brutal slavery Pharaoh can be placed in the same category as other tyrants such as Hitler, Stalin and Amin. It was God who heard the cries of the oppressed Hebrew slaves and decided the time had come for freedom. This is why the Exodus story was so real for the African American slaves, and why so many of the Negro spirituals, which contain deep pathos, are based on it.

The Exodus was a great victory for justice and Pharaoh got his comeuppance. And the Name of the Lord was proclaimed throughout the earth, and it still is today! As with Hitler's demise, there was rejoicing in the streets (Exodus 15:1ff).

But why did God send 10 plagues? Couldn't God have just sent in some magic carpets and whisked them out? As ridiculous as this is, God did send other supernatural plagues, such as the plague of

darkness. Couldn't He have got them out in one go if He had wanted, by giving them the light to escape by?

The Exodus was clearly about more than the salvation of Israel; just as the resurrection of Jesus is about more than the salvation of us! The Exodus was a demonstration of the mighty power of the Lord and an exaltation of His Name.

Although God in His foreknowledge needed to warn Moses and Aaron that Pharaoh would resist, and God would harden Pharaoh's heart, nevertheless I believe God had a plan A and a plan B for Pharaoh and all Egypt.

First, we notice an increasing intensity in the severity of the plagues. I believe that plan A was to bring Pharaoh to repentance to acknowledge the one true God of Israel. It was just before the 7th plague that Scriptures says to Pharaoh, *For this reason I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.* What a privilege this could have been! Yet Pharaoh resisted. The 7th plague was the most intense yet and equivalent to the first 6 put together. The amazing thing is that plan A almost worked, and after the 7th plague Pharaoh confessed, *I have sinned* (Exodus 9:27-28), though Pharaoh then once more hardened his heart. The plagues actually represented the longsuffering of God.

Second, we notice an increasing intensity in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. This is a difficult issue, not only because of the idea of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, but also because there are different Hebrew words used for the verb 'to harden'. In summary, the text tells us that *Pharaoh hardened his heart, or, Pharaoh's heart was hardened*, until the 6th plague. Significantly, the text only says that the *Lord hardened Pharaoh heart*, (in the sense of making Pharaoh's heart obstinate,) after the 7th plague, when Pharaoh had had ample opportunity to repent. It is as if God is saying, "OK, I'm taking over now, and it's time for plan B." Plan B was an exercise of God's justice, God would likewise be glorified, and Pharaoh would feel the sting!

I think we see the same sort of idea in Romans 1 where Paul talks about *the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men* (Romans 1:18). Paul says repeatedly, *God gave them up* (Romans 1:24,26,28). I think after the 7th plague God gave Pharaoh up. Plan B meant judgment and the destruction of the socio-economic reality of what had been Egypt.

But God's judgments were not only a demonstration of His power. He could of course wipe out any nation with the breath of His mouth (Exodus 9:15). They were also a demonstration of His precision. The 10 plagues were not random, but were a judgment on the false gods of Egypt. The 10th plague in particular was an exercise of God's justice, measure for measure. There was economic justice in that the Hebrew slaves left Egypt with silver and gold, a sort of payment for years of hard labour (Exodus 11:2-3). There was justice in that Pharaoh's servants would bow down to Moses (Exodus 11:8) – the Lord's servants had been forced to bow down to Pharaoh, but now Pharaoh's servants would be forced to bow down to Moses. As terrible as it may sound, there was even justice in the cries (lit. shrieks) as the firstborn across all Egypt were killed (Exodus 11:6), a measure for measure justice for the cries of the Israelite slaves (Exodus 2:23, 3:7,3:9, 5:8).

The plagues of Egypt were not the revenge of an all powerful God taking advantage of human fragility, but as Jesus said, *with the measure you use it will be measured to you.*

Romans 9:14 *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!*