

*Hardened Hearts Leading to Destruction: Joshua 11:19-20*

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Have you ever wrestled with the question of how God's sovereignty relates to human responsibility? This is a major theological question and one that I refer to with some regularity. I think it's an important matter for us to think about, especially since there is such a temptation to overly simplify this in ways that don't quite line up with Scripture. If we say that God is completely in control of every decision that humans make, does that mean that we're basically robots, and therefore not truly responsible for our actions? Or if we affirm that humans do make meaningful choices, and we are to be held accountable for those choices, does that mean that God cannot be totally in control of what happens in the world?

Mid-week I decided to narrow the focus of this sermon. I had been planning to cover the remaining events of chapters 10-12. But I was so intrigued by chapter 11 verse 20 that I decided to focus our study for this morning on this one theme. The theme of hardening. Hardened hearts leading to destruction, and thinking about the Lord's role in hardening hearts as well as the human guilt of hardening one's own heart.

I'll start with a very brief overview of these chapters, and then we'll move into a discussion of the Lord hardening the hearts of the Canaanites.

Last Sunday I preached on the first part of chapter 10 where we read of the amazing miracle of the sun standing still. The Gibeonites were being attacked by 5 armies. The Gibeonites, who had previously lied to Israel, tricked them into making a covenant with them. Now they are calling for Joshua to come and rescue them. So Joshua and the Israelite army marched all night and attacked these armies. The Lord fired down deadly hailstones upon their enemies. And Joshua prayed for the sun to stand still, and it did, until they were able to vanquish those enemies. It was a major advance in the conquest of the Promised Land.

And that is the last battle recorded in detail for us in the book of Joshua. There was the taking of Jericho, the 2 battles with Ai, and now this battle against the 5 armies threatening Gibeon. Those battles made up what we could call the central campaign. They have moved into the Promised Land, moved up into the hill

country, and have taken control of a significant and central portion of Canaan.

The rest of the conquest is told to us in rapid succession, in a very concise manner. In chapter 10 beginning in verse 29 and going to the end of the chapter, we read of the southern campaign. Chapter 11 tells of the northern campaign. And then chapter 12 is basically a summary of the whole thing. Next Sunday I'll go into more detail on these campaigns.

But let's hone in now on chapter 11 verses 19-20. Verse 19 makes an interesting statement, highlighting the unique response of the Gibeonites. They were the one group that made peace with Israel. Of course, we know the story. It was through deceit that the Gibeonites accomplished this. But still, it was a remarkable thing that they separated themselves from all the other peoples of Canaan in this way.

Remember we saw this at the start of chapter 9. The other kings were gathering together in alliance against Israel. But Gibeon did the exact opposite. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," was their strategy. And in a way similar to Rahab they became joined to Israel. God was gracious to allow this to happen, and there were ongoing blessings to the Gibeonites as a result of this.

This statement in 11:19 is interesting because it seems to imply that it might have been possible for other peoples to have done something similar. It leaves us asking, "What if . . .?" What if other groups had made attempts to make peace with Israel?

Matthew Henry, a well-known Bible teacher from the 1600s whose Bible commentary is still popular, says about this verse, "It is intimated that other cities might have made as good terms for themselves, without ragged clothes and clouted shoes, if they would have humbled themselves, but they never so much as *desired conditions of peace.*"<sup>1</sup>

Well, it's just a hypothetical consideration. The real point of the verse is to emphasize the hardness of heart on the part of all the peoples of the land, Gibeon being the only exception. Only one people group made peace with Israel. All the other groups resisted peace. They made war against Israel. And Israel defeated them, because the Lord was fighting on their behalf.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 312). Peabody: Hendrickson.

The end of verse 19 says that Israel took them all in battle.

### **The Consequences of a Hard Heart**

That leads us into our first main point for this morning, the consequences of a hard heart. For the peoples of Canaan, the consequence was complete annihilation. They were destroyed at the hands of Israel's army.

We do know some things about the Canaanites' hardness of heart. They were hardened against God, and they were involved in such things as incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual acts, and bestiality. Leviticus 18 gives many prohibitions about such sins. Just prior to that list of commands, the Lord says, "you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes" (v. 3). And following all those prohibitions, the Lord says, "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean . . ." (v. 24).

It is clear that the people of Canaan had sunk very low in their sexual perversions and idolatry. Now they are receiving the judgment they deserve.

I'll go back to something I mentioned when we were in chapter 6. In verse 1 the description of Jericho being shut up inside and out gives us a picture not only of the physical state of the city, but we could think of it as a description of the spiritual condition of their hearts as well. The people of the city were spiritually closed. Rahab's window was open, with the scarlet cord hanging down. That was the one opening, the one place where there was openness to the God of Israel. But the rest of the city remained shut up, hardened against Yahweh.

A very important thing to understand in that scene is that it was not their wickedness that made their destruction certain. It was their hardness of heart, their refusal to repent, their refusal to make peace with Yahweh. They resisted Him to the very end.

Rahab was spared destruction in spite of her wickedness. The Gibeonites, likewise, were spared destruction in spite of their deceit and wickedness. So it's not about getting virtue and then you don't get destroyed. It's about humbly moving toward the Lord.

We need to be reminded of this again and again. The contrast between Rahab and the rest of the city is not a contrast between holy living and wicked living. The contrast between Gibeon and the rest of the peoples of Canaan is not a contrast

between holy living and wicked living. It's a contrast between faith and rejection. It's a contrast between making peace and not making peace. Rahab, and the Gibeonites, had some recognition of and appreciation for Israel's God. They were looking to Him, not rejecting Him or fighting against Him, but wanting to be united to Him, wanting to be included among His people.

The city of Nineveh provides another illustration that's helpful here. Nineveh was another very wicked city in ancient times. But after Jonah preached there, the city repented. And God did not destroy them. The same might have been true for other groups in the Promised Land, if they had responded like Rahab or the Gibeonites, if they had responded like Nineveh.

What about you? Are you hard-hearted? Are you digging in your heels against the Lord? Are you resisting Him, rejecting Him, rebelling against Him? I warn you . . . don't continue down that path! It leads to destruction. There are consequences, both now in this life and forever in hell, if you do not repent. You cannot beat Him. Your only hope is to join Him, to be joined to Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. Look to Him in faith and plead for mercy.

The many nations within Canaan were destroyed for their stubborn rebellion against the One true and living God. And in God's providence, the destruction they deserved was also the victory He had promised to Israel.

### **God's Sovereignty over Hard Hearts**

This leads to our second main point, which is to recognize God's sovereignty over hard hearts. Do you see how this is stated so plainly in verse 20?

*“For it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the LORD commanded Moses.”* (Joshua 11:20, ESV)

God was sovereign over the hardening of their hearts. It was His will for their hearts to remain hardened against Him, leading to their destruction, leading to them receiving no mercy. This had been planned by God from beforehand. The Lord had given Moses these commands, to relay to the Israelites, that they should destroy the inhabitants of Canaan. And the Lord gave those commands knowing and ordaining that the Canaanites would remain hard hearted.

To further explore this concept of hardening, we need to go to the example of Pharaoh. That story is told in the book of Exodus, but the place I want to start is Romans 9 where Paul reflects back on that Old Testament story as he's teaching us about God's unconditional election, and how He has mercy on some but hardens others.

Please turn with me to Romans 9:14-23 (page 945 in pew Bibles). We're going to be looking at these verses in some detail as they are closely related to Joshua 11:20.

*“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 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 9:14–18, ESV)

It's interesting to see in this paragraph the contrast between human will and God's will. We often speak of free will, referring to human free will. But how much time have you spent thinking about God's free will? That's what this passage is about—God's absolutely free will. Verse 16 says that God's bestowal of mercy does not depend on human will. Verse 18 refers twice to God's free will. He has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

The teaching about God's hardening of individuals may be a very difficult concept to grasp, and even more difficult to accept. But we have to recognize that God is absolutely sovereign and free.

Let's think back to the story of Exodus, as Paul does, to try to understand this better. What is so interesting about God's dealings with Pharaoh is that we see God's sovereignty over evil, and we also see Pharaoh's personal rebellion against God.

We could ask the question, Did God harden Pharaoh's heart, as Paul indicates in Romans 9:17-18? Or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? If we read the Exodus narrative carefully, the answer we have to give is – “Yes”! It's both. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And Pharaoh hardened his own heart. God is in control. He has mercy on whom He wills, and He hardens whom He wills. But that does not mean that we're robots. His sovereignty does not cancel out our real choices for which we are

held accountable. On the one hand, those whom God chooses for salvation, they will make a real decision for Christ and will repent and believe. On the other hand, those whom God hardens will decide again and again to reject God, ignore Him, rebel against Him.

That's the case with Pharaoh. It's important to see in Exodus that the very first place where it mentions Pharaoh's hard heart, it is the Lord saying, "I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go" (4:21). And there are several other places where it says that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart (7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8). There are also places where it leaves it a bit ambiguous. It puts it in the passive voice, stating simply that "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" (7:13-14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35). And then there are also a few places where it clearly mentions Pharaoh's active role in this as well. It says that Pharaoh sinned and hardened his heart. So you see it is both – and. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

We get into trouble when we try to be more philosophically satisfying than biblical. God's ways are not going to fit into nice neat philosophical categories for us. Our focus should be on seeing God as He reveals Himself in Scripture, not trying to squeeze Him into our own preconceived notions about who He should be and how He should act.

God is free. He is absolutely free to do as He pleases. And in His freedom He acts with a very clear purpose, which Romans 9:17 reveals to us. God has determined to make His power known and to proclaim His Name in all the earth. This is God's overarching aim in all that He does. And there is nothing unfair or unjust about this. As R. C. Sproul puts it very succinctly, "The elect get grace; the non-elect get justice. Nobody gets injustice."<sup>2</sup>

So if you're a believer you have no right to boast in yourself that you are saved. You once had a hard heart toward the Lord, and you deserved to be left in that hardened state. You also deserve the consequences that come along with that. But we have received mercy through Jesus Christ. Praise be to God!

### **God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility**

In Romans 9:19 Paul brings up the question, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" This directly states the question about how God's sovereignty and human responsibility relate. If God is sovereign in all of this, then how

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<sup>2</sup> Romans, page 324.

can He still hold human beings responsible for their actions? In the case of Pharaoh, for instance . . . If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it doesn't seem fair that God would consider Pharaoh guilty for his rebellion. Or thinking of the Canaanites, as we read in Joshua 11:20. If it was God who hardened their hearts, then how is it fair for them to be destroyed because of their hard hearts?

This is the tension we feel, and our finite minds want to resolve this tension in a simplistic manner. So we assume that one of these needs to cancel out the other or at least diminish the other in some way. And since we tend to cherish (almost idolize) the idea of human free will, the common viewpoint is that our free will limits God's sovereignty.

In our day, that is a very common objection to what we see in Romans 9 and other places in the Bible, like Joshua 11:20.

Now, I think a good place to start is to clarify what God's "will" is referring to in the question posed in Romans 9:19. "For who can resist his will?" It's helpful here to recognize that the Bible speaks of God's will in a couple different ways. Theologians use various terms in making this distinction. I'll speak of God's revealed will and His secret will. God's revealed will is what we see throughout the Bible in all of God's guidelines and commands and instructions for us. God gives commands, which He wants us to obey. He does not delight in sin. He is deeply saddened by our rebellion and disobedience.

In this sense, as we think about the Canaanites, we could think in terms of Ezekiel 33:11 where the Lord says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live . . ." His revealed will is that they repent and turn to Him and live.

It doesn't make God happy to see people hardening their hearts against Him and going to destruction. It's not a pleasant thing.

But there is a depth to God's purposes that is far beyond our comprehension. As we're seeing in these verses we're looking at this morning (both in Joshua 11 and Romans 9), God also ordains that certain individuals remain hardened against Him. This we would understand in terms of God's secret will. Such is the mystery of God's plans. He ordains that certain individuals be hardened, even though He does not find delight in their hardening, in and of itself. What He does delight in is the overall outcome—which is the display of His own glory in all of its fullness—both in justice and in mercy.

Think of Judas. God does not look at the heart of Judas and find pleasure in what He sees there. It does not warm God's heart to know of that cold-hearted betrayal. But God does find great joy in the fact that a multitude of sinners are being redeemed through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, and Judas's betrayal was part of the providential plans that brought that about.

Similarly in the case of Pharaoh. God is not happy about Pharaoh's pride and stubbornness and rebellion. But God does rejoice to show His infinite power over such a leader as Pharaoh. And God rejoices to free His people from such a wicked taskmaster.

And similarly in the case of the Canaanites. God isn't giddy about seeing their hard heartedness or their destruction. But He is very passionate (joyfully passionate) about fulfilling His promises to Israel.

There is a complexity to God's purposes. There is also a mysterious relationship between God's sovereignty and our choices, such that both remain entirely in tact even when we can't piece them together in our own understanding.

In which sense is the objection of Romans 9:19 referring to God's will? The objection is, "Why does he still find fault?" And the basis for the objection is, "For who can resist his will?" Is that a reference to God's revealed will or His secret will? Well, it must be His secret will. Who can resist His will, meaning Nobody can resist His will. That would be a reference to God's secret, sovereign will. Because people resist God's revealed will all the time. That's exactly what Pharaoh was doing. God's revealed will to Pharaoh was, "Let my people go!" Pharaoh resisted, and resisted again, and hardened his heart and rebelled. But even though his actions as a morally responsible human being directly contradicted God's revealed will, those same actions were exactly according to God's secret will. God ordained that Pharaoh, of his own volition, would remain hardened.

So it's this secret will of God that is at the center of this question—God's sovereign decree of all things, including evil choices made by men and women—that's what this objection has to do with. If God planned all of this, then is everyone just a puppet? Do human decisions have any significance?

That's the question of verse 19. It's important to notice that Paul, in his response, does not try to modify the assumption which is the basis for the question. Paul completely agrees with the premise of the question, namely, that nobody can resist God's

will. Paul doesn't try to get God off the hook by limiting His sovereignty. He takes it as a given that nobody can resist God's will. Every human decision, whether good or bad, is ordained by Almighty God.

There are two pieces to the explanation. It might be that neither is quite what we're looking for. But that's the case sometimes, isn't it. The answer God gives is not quite what we were anticipating. Well, the answer here transcends the philosophical conundrums we can get ourselves into when we're trying to piece together divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This answer emphasizes God's overarching plans throughout history.

The first piece of the explanation comes in verse 22, which tells of God's desire to show His wrath and to make known His power. That's very close to what God said to Pharaoh, quoted in verse 17—"that I might show my power in you." God wants to manifest His glory, and part of how He does that is by defeating and destroying those who oppose Him.

This is what verse 22 is talking about. God has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. This means that God has ordained that certain individuals will end up in hell. They will remain hardened against God, and in the end they will experience God's wrath. But God is patient even with those individuals in the sense that He does not destroy them immediately. He allows them to live and to continue in rebellion against Him. Why would God do this?

Pharaoh is again a fitting example. God could have destroyed Pharaoh after the first plague, or even before the first plague. God could have brought the Israelites out of Egypt in any number of ways. But He kept Pharaoh alive and allowed Pharaoh to continue rebelling. God ordained that Pharaoh's heart would become more and more obstinate. For what purpose? So that God's power over Pharaoh would be seen all the more clearly and gloriously.

Similarly with the Canaanites. They weren't destroyed all at once. Joshua 11:18 says that Joshua made war a long time with all those kings. Based on what we know about the timing of Caleb's life, it's estimated that the conquest may have taken about 7 years. God could have destroyed all the inhabitants of Canaan in a moment. But instead He glorified Himself in battle and battle after battle, showing His power over each of those cities.

But that is not all. That is not even the main objective. God's patience with vessels of wrath is a secondary goal which serves a higher goal. Notice the purpose statement in Romans 9:23, which is the other piece of the explanation, "*in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.*"

Verse 22 is the backdrop to verse 23. God showing His wrath is the backdrop to Him showing the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy. He demonstrates His wrath upon vessels of wrath, not merely as an end in itself, but for the greater purpose of making known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy.

So we don't get a direct answer to our philosophical questions. But we get something better than that. We get a revelation of God's eternal and mysterious plans. God wants to display the full spectrum of His divine characteristics, and we will praise Him forever for these characteristics, especially His mercy.

God does not delight in wrath like He delights in mercy. But if it was not for the wrath of God, what would His mercy mean to us?

So as we come back to the story of the Israelites taking the land, in conclusion, we should marvel at the wonderful mercy of God to His people. He poured out His wrath on hard-hearted rebels. He ordained their hardness of heart, and they were also fully responsible for their hardness of heart. They truly deserved it, as we all deserve to remain in that condition. But in stark contrast to that, out of that darkness, the Lord had mercy on a people whom He freely chose as His own.

The take home lesson for them and us is summarized in Deuteronomy 9:4-5.

*"Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."* (Deuteronomy 9:4-5, ESV)

Let me speak briefly to unbelievers and then to believers as I close. If you're an unbeliever and you're paying close attention

here, you may be wondering, Well if God has hardened my heart, then there's no hope for me. I might as well give up because I'm going to hell no matter what. That's not at all the conclusion you should come to. As long as you're alive there's hope. Because as long as you're alive there's an opportunity for repentance. Remember what I said about Rahab and the Gibeonites? There was mercy for them! They sought mercy, and they found it. That can be your story as well. Simply cry out to God for mercy, ask Him to forgive you, look to Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead. And you will be saved.

For believers, this is a reminder of our utter dependency on God. It's a reminder of what He saved us from. It's a vivid picture that we should look at often, a picture of unrepentant rebellion. In stark contrast to that, against the dark backdrop of that hardness of heart, we should be overcome with the brilliance of what God is doing in our lives now. He has given us new hearts. He has changed our desires so that we repent of sin and respond to His warnings and hope in His promises. We can live with confidence that He is for us and is with us in the battle against our spiritual foes. We'll return to that theme and others next week as we look at the events in these chapters that tell of Israel taking the land.