

God's Sovereignty in Circumstances

Romans 9:17

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Your life is not just a combination of time plus chance. The incidents in your life ever since you were born are not just lucky or unlucky coincidences. You may remember we said, "The Creator that made the universe, who took the trouble to plan the wings of little flies and how many petals a daffodil would have, has gone to the same trouble over your creation and he has put you here with a special purpose in mind. He has a special design and plan for your life. Of course, we've also been saying that all of us are absolutely free and able to reject this plan or to accept it. We have free wills. We are not forced to accept God's plan for us.

If you have any doubt about it or are influenced at all by Skinner's determinism teaching, then all you have to do is look at that one famous instance of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. He said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not!" [Matthew 23:37] That is God in his Son saying, "How often I have wanted you to come, but you would not." That is our Creator saying, "However much I want you to do things; however much I plan your lives, you still have the free will to refuse my plan." It is important for us to grasp that.

Now let's tackle that whole truth from a different angle. What if you accept God's plan for your life? You accept it and you cooperate with it. But other people who have power to affect your life, like bosses, teachers, husbands, wives, and parents, reject God's plan for their lives. What if you accept God's plan for your life, but other people, who can affect your life, reject God's plan for them, and they continue to be able to affect the circumstances of your life? In other words, does God have any sovereignty over the people who reject his plan for their lives but affect your life by the things they do? Can God control the way other lives affect your life, when those other lives are not under his control? That's what I'd like for you to think with me today. Has God sovereignty over the circumstances in your life that depend upon others actions than yours?

I can't imagine one of us who is not concerned about that, because there is not one of us whose life is not affected by the actions of other people. Many of them don't care a button for God, and yet they are able to affect our lives in all kinds of ways. Would you share with me a study on God's sovereignty over circumstances? Romans 9:17: "For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.'" The footnote to this verse refers to Exodus 9:16: "But for this purpose have I let you live, to show you my power, so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." Now who is speaking? We must go back to verse 13: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, 'Let my people go, that they may serve me.'" Paul makes scripture synonymous with God. He says, "The scripture said to Pharaoh (or God said to Pharaoh), 'For this purpose I have raised you up, to show my power in you.'"

Now what on earth has that to do with our question: Has God sovereignty to control the circumstances in my life that are due to the actions of other people who do not respect him? Pharaoh was one such person; that is the relevance of it. Pharaoh was like that. Pharaoh didn't accept in any way God's plan for his life, and yet Pharaoh had almost absolute control over God's people, the Israelites.

God is saying, "For this purpose I have raised you up, Pharaoh." He is not talking about us who have a plan for our lives, he is talking about a king of Egypt who utterly rejected the plan that he had for his life. And God is saying, "For this purpose I have raised you up." What does that mean? I just remind you of the historical situation. It was about 1450 B.C., about 3400 years ago. The Israelites were slaves to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. God, the Creator of the universe, made Himself real to Moses and explained to Moses that he was going to be used to lead the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt so that they could settle in the land of Canaan where they are this very day. Pharaoh himself rejected God's whole plan. He wanted to hold on to the cheap labor that he had, so that even when Moses approached him about this, he rejected it completely.

Let's follow carefully through it in Exodus 5. I think you will see what God is saying to us. Exodus 5:1, Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go.'" Exodus 5:2: "But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.'" That was Pharaoh's response. It is important for us to see that Pharaoh exercised that defiant rebellion on his own. God didn't prompt him to do it. Pharaoh exercised his own rebellion, on his own, without any influence of God. God can't influence a will that will not let him influence it. God can't influence your will, if you won't let him influence it. Pharaoh wouldn't let God influence his will, so God couldn't influence it. Pharaoh did that on his own -- he said no, I don't want anything to do with your God.

In fact, what Pharaoh did was to take the straw from them so that they had to come up with the same quota of bricks yet find their own straw. Then begins, loved ones, the series of actions that God took to convince Pharaoh that he was dealing with the Creator of the whole universe. That whole series of actions begins, in Exodus 7:8-14, "And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle, ' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.' So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as the Lord commanded; Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. For every man cast down his rod and they became serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them; as the Lord had said. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuses to let the people go.'"

Do you see it wasn't God that hardened Pharaoh's heart? That is the whole difficulty we come up against -- the famous phrases that indicate God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Do you see at these early stages there is no question of God hardening Pharaoh's heart? God couldn't touch Pharaoh, because Pharaoh was exercising his own will. It was Pharaoh that hardened his own heart. In verse 13 it says, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" and in verse 14 it says, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is hardened.'" The same English word is used for two separate Hebrew words. In verse 13 the Hebrew word is "chazaq" and it means 'strengthened'. In verse 14 the Hebrew word is "Qasheh" and means 'stubborn'. Actually the translation is, "Still Pharaoh's heart was strengthened and he would not listen to them; as the Lord had said. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is stubborn, he refuses to let the people go.'"

Loved ones, those variations that go on throughout the first five plagues. God sends frogs, blood, gnats, boils -- he sends five plagues upon the Egyptians. Each time you read that Pharaoh either strengthened his heart or his heart became stubborn. All the time it is Pharaoh doing it himself again and again. It has nothing to do with God hardening his heart; it is Pharaoh hardening his own

heart each time. In Exodus 7:22 for instance, after the blood plague: "But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them; as the Lord had said." Exodus 8:15, after the plague of frogs: "But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them." The word hardened there is actually 'stubborn'; his heart became stubborn. Then Exodus 8:18-19: "The magicians tried by their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. And the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'" Even the magicians were convinced that this was the Creator of the universe that they were dealing with. "But Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them; as the Lord had said." In Exodus 8:32, again the same thing: "But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go." Then in Exodus 9:7, where God sent the cattle disease: "And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the cattle of the Israelites was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go." So five plagues came and went. Even magicians were convinced that this was the Creator of the universe but Pharaoh hardened his own heart. His own heart became strong and stubborn and he would not yield.

Now loved ones, it is important for us to see that God could not influence the will of Pharaoh and cannot influence your will. You decide for yourself which way your life is going to go, as Pharaoh decided for himself. After five plagues, Pharaoh became strong in his own will to oppose God; he became stubborn in his own resolve to have his own way whether this was the Creator of the universe or not. He did it so persistently and consistently and freely that it is obvious to any historian that Pharaoh was deliberately rejecting the God that he knew was the Creator of the universe.

Now it is only after that time -- after Pharaoh has decided his own destiny by repeatedly rejecting God's attempts to convince him that he was dealing with his own Maker, it is only after those five plagues and those repeated resistances by Pharaoh -- that you read these significant words in Exodus 9:12: "But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them; as the Lord had spoken to Moses." That is the first time in the whole record that you read that the Lord did the hardening. Up to then it is Pharaoh who is the subject of every sentence. Do you know which Hebrew word is used here? It isn't the word for hardened; it isn't the word for stubborn. It is the word for 'strengthened', "Qasheh". In other words, God strengthened Pharaoh's heart to do what his own will had determined to do, but that he might not carry out because of fear of the consequences. Do you see that? God strengthened Pharaoh's heart to be honest. Pharaoh had already determined "I will not yield to the Maker of the universe, I will not let his people go." After those repeated refusals from Pharaoh, God strengthened his heart; not hardened his heart, but strengthened his heart that he would carry out what he intended in his own will to do anyway, but what he might have suppressed from fear of the consequences. In that way, God did use Pharaoh to display his own power in the consequent five plagues.

In other words, God didn't raise Stalin up; he didn't make Stalin evil. He didn't raise Hitler up in that he made Hitler evil or cruel to produce a Belsen concentration camp. God did not raise Pharaoh up in that he made him evil and unable to do anything but reject God. God looked at these men whom he had made with free wills, as you and I have, and he watched them in their lives. He watched them exercising their wills continually against him, repeatedly resisting him more and more until they had so hardened their own hearts that their eternal destiny was absolutely settled. Then God began to control and restrain and affect the actions that they took, especially in regard to the glorifying of his own nature, the setting forth of his own power in history, to the conforming of his children to the image of his own nature. God didn't make Pharaoh, Pharaoh made himself. You only have to read the record to see Pharaoh repeatedly refused God. But when he reaches that point

then God begins to affect his courage to do what he intended to do so that God's power could be set forth.

So, loved ones, it is vital for us when we casually have those arguments: "God hardened Pharaoh's heart; he has us all as marionettes; he pulls the string and we move." Not at all. Read the record and you find Pharaoh hardened his heart until eventually, after the sixth plague when he had determined his own destiny; God then strengthened Pharaoh's heart to exercise his will and do what he otherwise might have suppressed from fear of consequences. It is the same in our own lives. God can't make your boss a Christian; he can't make your husband or wife obedient to him. They have free wills, they are free to respond or reject him. But God is able to affect their actions when those actions begin to affect your life, just the same way as he was able to affect Pharaoh's actions when they affected his own children, the Israelites.

There are two keys that I would like you to remember. One is in Matthew 5:28 and it refers to the people themselves who reject God and go their own way. Some of us may have questions about that. Jesus' words are: "But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." You might say that if God had held Pharaoh back from doing what he intended to do, might he not have come to God and been reconciled. There is the key. It doesn't matter whether you do the thing or not, if you have it in your heart, you may as well have done it. Lack of opportunity does not create a righteous act out of a sin. That is the truth in regard to Pharaoh. Pharaoh had his heart set against God and against his people. It didn't matter whether he expressed that or didn't express it; he had already determined his own eternal destiny by the attitude of his heart. So it is good to see that whether people express it or don't express it does not affect their relationship with God. It is what they have in their heart that matters, and God judges them according to that. He is free in a sense to control the outward effects of what they do.

The other key refers to ourselves. It is in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." No one does anything to affect your life without God's permission. So if you have lost a job, or you have a husband or wife who seems to be preventing you doing what you want with your life, realize this; they cannot do anything that will spoil God's plan for your life. God will not permit anybody to spoil what he has designed for you. God is able to do what he did in relationship to the Israelites. He is able so to control and affect and restrain the actions of other people who have no respect for God. He is able to control their actions so that they do not affect your life in any way that is outside his will.

Loved ones, there is no place for resentment. If you study that whole record of Pharaoh and then study other instances in Scripture, there is no place for you sitting at home boiling with resentment that your parents influenced your life this way, or your wife prevents you doing this or your husband prevents you doing that, or your boss has taken away your opportunity to serve God. It is just not true. Your dear Father will not allow anyone to adversely affect your life, whether they respect him or not. He is able to control the effects they have on your life. Why? "The king's heart is like a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." [Proverbs 21:1] The will is not. From that point of view your boss can do whatever he wants. But the heart of your boss is in the hand of the Lord, and God can control what outward actions will result from that man's will, particularly where they affect your life.

It is a beautiful, glorious position to be in. Will you free yourself from any resentment or worry or anxiety? Those of you whose finances aren't going well or whose businesses are not going well have only one person to blame. That is either God or yourself. But God does not allow anybody else to affect adversely the plan he has for your life. The probable truth is, if there is something not going right in your life, God is trying to bring you into some new beauty, some new likeness to his Son. That is why he is allowing you to stumble for a while over this, and you are missing the whole point of it by saying, "If I only had different circumstances" or "If I only had a different boss" or "If I had different people working with me" or "If I had a different school." No. That isn't the issue. God allows none of these to affect your life as far as his plan for you is concerned. It is possible to relax saying, "Father, this doesn't seem to be going the way I thought you wanted it to go, because you promised that you would be my Sun and my Shield. You promised that in everything my hand does I would prosper. This seems to be not prospering. This course that I am pursuing, this subject that I'm studying, this business that I'm involved in, this marriage that I'm in, this family that I'm in; it doesn't seem to be prospering. Now Father, I repent of all this blaming Pharaoh or all the other people. Lord, I see that though their wills are not under your control, the effect that they can have on my life is. So Lord, I see that there is nothing happening to me here that you do not know about and that you have not permitted. Lord, what are you trying to tell me? Will you explain to me some way that I have to change? Is there some way in which I have to exercise more faith in you, Lord? Will you describe it to me, and I'll do it." That's it, loved ones.

It is a beautiful way to live. Will you think about it, and by all means read the verses again? It is tricky the exegesis there. Will you grasp most of all that 'the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord' and the heart of your boss or your parents or your wife or your husband is in the hand of the Lord.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we have listened to so much untruth about you hardening Pharaoh's heart but Lord, it's difficult sometimes to see through all the misconceptions we've had. Lord, we see you only withdraw your softening grace after a man has finally decided to reject you and after you are convinced that he knows what he is about. So, Lord, thank you for that. Thank you, Father, it is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart and indeed, it is us who harden our hearts. You have nothing to do with it. Lord, we thank you that even after others have hardened their hearts against you, you are able to control and restrain the affects of their actions have on our own lives, just as you did Pharaoh's. In such a way, that your power was set forth to all nations, so that even the Israelites would be able to walk into the promised land if they only would. We would be so cowed by the mighty miracles and deliverance that you brought in your children. Lord, we thank you for that that you are able to do the same in our lives, that neither boss, husband or wife, mom or dad, nor even finances themselves are able to affect in any way our lives as far as your plans are concerned -- unless you allow it to happen. If you do, Lord, then we know it is for our good and to conform us to your image.

Thank you, Lord, you will lift off the discipline immediately when we respond to you with willing hearts. Lord, thank you.

Father, we pray for the loved ones who will watch and listen to this talk wherever they may be. We pray for little ones like ourselves who may be just under it. We pray, Father, that you will show them that the heart of the king is in that hand of the Lord and we have nothing to fear except the rebellion of our own will. Thank you, Lord.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each of us today and throughout this week.