

ROMANS Part 84

Chapter 9:17-24

The publishing of God's name.



17 For the scripture is saying to Pharaoh that “For this selfsame thing I rouse you up, so that I should be displaying in you My power, and so that My name should be published in the entire earth.”18 Consequently, then, to whom He will, He is merciful, yet whom He will, He is hardening. 19 You will be protesting to me, then, “Why, then, is He still blaming?

for who has withstood His intention?” 20 O man! who are you, to be sure, who are answering again to God? That which is molded will not protest to the molder, “Why do you make me thus?” 21 Or has not the potter the right over the clay, out of the same kneading to make one vessel, indeed, for honor, yet one for dishonor? Now if God, wanting to display His indignation and to make His powerful doings known, carries, with much patience, the vessels of indignation, adapted for destruction, 23 it is that He should also be making known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He makes ready before for glory—24 us, whom He calls also, not only out of the Jews, but out of the nations also.

The reason for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is made evident here, and it is a potentially disturbing reason but also mesmerizing: God wanted to display His power so that His name would be published in the entire earth. Thus, God caused Pharaoh to withstand His plain and simple directive, “Let My people go,” so that the Exodus would become famous for millennia. The plan worked.

First of all, is God an egomaniac? No, but He knows He's the life of the party. Secondly, there are many ways in which the Deity could have published His name in the entire Earth without the use of unwitting human accomplices: He could have taken out an advertisement in *The Egyptian Times*; He could have written a book (oh wait, He did); He could have written with His finger in the clouds—the Wicked Witch of the West did that to fine effect in *The Wizard of Oz*, but with her broomstick; He could have simply employed public service announcements. God is famous for His booming voice (Sinai being Exhibit A), so why not just thunder from on high and rattle windows?

But no. God works invisibly through human beings. Human beings are God's paintbrushes upon the canvas of life and time. God is not a college professor filling

auditoriums with inert students attending to His droning with notepads in hand. No, but God teaches great lessons *to* us by working the lessons *through* us. All the world is a living classroom, and people are the real-time, animated lessons. Every morning that we awake, class begins. At night, it continues in our sleep. We learn things simply by looking in the mirror, or by considering our own actions and reactions to events both evil and good. This life could be called “On The Job Training,” or “The School Of Hard Knocks,” or “Shit Happens,” or “Learn By Doing.” To enroll, you need only be born.

In the case of Pharaoh, God displayed His power in him and through him by hardening his heart against Israel. Everyone learns through this memorable clash of power, including Israel, us, Moses, Pharaoh, the celestial world. Though some of the players in this drama suffer more than others in the short term, in the long term everyone benefits. To reach that conclusion one only needs a statement concerning it, and here it is: “The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Psalm 145:9). After figuring this out (or, rather, simply believing it), one can drag all of life’s events through this filter and feel better.

TAPESTRY OF LAND AND SEA

Before God hardened his heart, I believe Pharaoh to have been a decent guy. If he wasn’t, then why the necessity of the divine touch? Being a nice guy purposely turned hard by God for the sake of an enduring object lesson to all of humanity including himself was simply Pharaoh’s lot in life. Some people are surgeons, others are dog-catchers; some people serve hamburgers at McDonalds, others invent the airplane; some people are thieves and liars, others are members of congress (but I repeat myself). Some people sell Avon products, others get their hearts hardened by God and refuse to let Israelites go. We all must play the hands dealt us. The mix of humanity here is as varied as sea life.

Nothing is the same beneath the vast green seas, not even within a species. A single creature-class contains variations of color, size, purpose, role—and order in the food-chain. Is it the shark’s fault that it eats squid? It must be terrible to be a squid then. But the squid eats shrimp, so I guess it sucks to be a shrimp. But shrimp eat

plankton, so who could possibly envy plankton? Just when you think that the shark is at the top of the food chain, you must consider man. It must be great to be a human then. Is it? I know some human beings who would trade places with plankton. There are perhaps certain varieties of plankton wishing they could live in an American suburb and drive a Prius. Well, as they say, the plankton is always stupider on the other side of the Marianas Trench.



“Certain varieties of plankton wish they could live in an American suburb and drive a Prius.”

Without exception, every creature of sea, land and air has reason to be both happy and miserable. It’s a waste of emotion all around because, from the plankton to the highest celestial magistrate, we are what we are. Species do not and cannot cross. God made everything according to its own kind, and there the things stay. Within the species *homo sapien*, there are vessels of honor and dishonor. Some of the sick, weak, unwise and insipid among us are vessels of honor, while many of the chiefs of the eon are

the opposite thing. Health and wealth never presuppose divine favor. I see some really hard-case people on the streets here: the homeless, the wheelchaired, the crutched. Worse, some kids are born with severe mental handicaps.

As soon as I start feeling bad for the kids, I realize that perhaps they are delivered from many of the stresses debilitating “normal” people: jobs, houses, bills, taxes, fashion, passion, Donald Trump. I put “normal” in quotation marks because who is really normal? Or perhaps it’s that everything is normal because God has made everything according to its own kind.

It must be terrible to be an Israelite enslaved in Egypt. Who wouldn’t want to be Pharaoh? But God clamps down

on Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh's son dies, so maybe it's not so great running a large, desert nation in 1446 B.C. How would you like to be a goat owned by Israelites enslaved by the leader of the large desert nation? What if it's better to be a goat than a Pharaoh? Has anyone ever talked to the goats? They seem oddly content to me. Someone once said of Nero, "I would rather be Nero's horse than his son." The Roman emperor infamously butchered members of his own family, while his horses lived murder-free lives in posh stables. Pharaoh probably had to shake his head at his own obstinacy, wondering what was happening to him. We escape these perplexities, knowing that what happens to us is the uninterrupted animation of God, working in us for the sake of His delight (Philippians 2:13), giving us "life and breath and all" (Acts 17:25).

HE NEEDS STUFF DONE

All of the above is how God works on the personal level with every creature. This is the educational level, where we all learn about God and ourselves via circumstance. We learn by experience and circumstance, and God is the God of all experience and circumstance. At the same time, there are practical things going on for God—stuff that He needs done. When history has been unwound, certain things will need to have happened to fulfill God's pre-composed script. Back there in Egypt in 1446 B.C. it was time for an unforgettable testimony of 1) God's power, 2) His love for Israel, and 3) His consistent insistence that bad guys finish last. The only way we can know that bad guys

finish last is if they finish last. For this to happen, God has to first make sure that there are bad guys. He must raise up the bad guys *so that* they can finish last. In 1446 B.C., God did not want a soft-hearted, accommodating Pharaoh. Since He wrote into the script a stubborn Egyptian leader long before the birth of Ramases II, He takes matters into His own hands and, as the scene unfolds in Earth-time, hardens Pharaoh's heart. Because, seriously—how would an obliging Pharaoh make for a capital "E" Exodus and a film-worthy project under the direction of Cecil B. DeMille in A.D. 1956? The famous film, *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston and Yule Brenner, would never have made it past the test screening:



CHARLTON HESTON (entering throne room for the first time): Let my people go.

YULE BRENNER: Okay.

Then the credits would roll and moviegoers would walk out of the theater saying, *What the hell was that?*

God could have made Pharaoh stubborn out of the birth canal, but then the stubbornness would have been assumed and probably attributed to a chain-smoking mother or Pharaoh being dropped on his head. God still would have been the responsible party, but who would have seen it that way? God had to make Pharaoh in such a way that He could dramatically and publicly change him. (I'm pretty sure this fits my theory that it's better to offend someone and apologize than never to offend at all; the apology opens a window into the soul of the apologizer, an impossible feat without a crack in the char-



Pharaoh's stubbornness might have been attributed to a chain-smoking mother.

acter to begin with.) So God made baby Pharaoh into a pleasant little pill. By the time he entered his high estate he was still a fairly reasonable man—this is my theory, mind you. Moses and Aaron's first miracle/plague was to foul the waters with red corpuscles and hemoglobin, but Pharaoh held up well under this horrific circumstance and may have actually coined the phrase, "This is a bloody disaster."

Think of Israel celebrating the Passover all these years. Without a stubborn Pharaoh, there is no Passover. But without God hardening Pharaoh's heart, there is no stubborn Pharaoh. After each plague, the man desperately wanted a small "e" exodus and would have unlocked the gates of the city himself. The man was not crazy. But the invisible hand of God overshadowed him after each plague and he mysteriously "hardened his heart." Doubters of God's sovereignty surely wish to chalk it up to human nature, saying, "Well, after each plague stopped, Pharaoh figured that it would be the last, and this emboldened him." This theory holds up for maybe

two plagues. After that I think it becomes apparent that the God of Moses and Aaron can bring out plagues like so many baby wipes from a plastic dispenser. After that, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart cannot be attributed to

who would turn the rainbow monochrome in the interest of "fairness and equality to all wavelengths of visible light."

Most people are spiritual Socialists in that they want to redistribute God's creation—just to even things out. (These people assume, of course, that God wants things evened

out; they're shocked at the possibility that God could possibly not think like them.) They would make the plankton more shark-like, and the shark more like plankton, or they would at least create everything neutral so that the nothing-matter could

then craft itself into whatever it pleased. A gross hybrid called "sharkton" would emerge from the spiritual Socialists' illicit laboratories, being some indistinct protoplasm that never ate anything while simultaneously refusing contentment at the bottom of the food chain.

"If God really did harden Pharaoh's heart," say the Christians, "then God has no right blaming Pharaoh for being hard." The simple problem here is that the Christians refuse to believe Romans 9:18. They refuse to take God at His Word, that He hardens whom He will and leaves everyone else kind and cooperative. They read the truth on the page, but then spit it out like old mouth rinse. They are God-deniers, even while claiming to be God's best friends. Blaming irresponsible parties may be cruel and unusual in conclaves of human invention, but this is not that. We



"Neither Pharaoh nor his wife could have guessed that the Creator of the Universe was pulling the strings."

natural human bull-headedness. Pharaoh's wife, I think, asked him why he was suddenly so inflexible, and he couldn't explain it himself, I don't think. "Maybe you're not sleeping well," said Phaessa. "Maybe we need to change your pillow." *Really*, Phaessa? Neither Pharaoh nor his wife could have guessed that the Creator of the Universe—the God of Moses and Aaron—was pulling the strings of the great king's disposition.

God's influence over all people is invisible. This is why most people think that they have unfettered wills and that God has left town. It's the "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" principle, and I think that most Christians will be mortified when they eventually discover that they made careers out of underestimating and even belittling the One and Only.

"OBJECTION, YOUR HONOR"

So much for *"Consequently, then, to whom He will, He is merciful, yet whom He will, He is hardening."* Now I hold my nose and move on to *"You will be protesting to me, then, 'Why, then, is He still blaming? for who has withstood His intention?'"*

After all I have said about the God of All Diversity, Power and Mercy, it is obscene that anyone could protest. A human being protesting to God about what He makes and how He makes it is like a tulip protesting to the soaking rain and the blazing sun; *careful what you wish for, plant. Do you really want to be left alone?* And yet the protest comes because many people believe God to be unfair. How can He be fair if He makes plankton so low and sharks so high? "Equal rights and equal opportunity for all creatures!" cry insipid Christian marchers



They are God-deniers.

are considering now the world of the Merciful God. It's a different world, yes?

As the Creator of Everything, God has a "problem" that mere created beings do not and cannot have.

GOD'S "PROBLEM"

God's "problem" is that He is God and that He knows everything and does everything. Human beings suffer many difficulties, yes, but this is not one of them. Imagine planning everything ahead of time, yet still You must run the pre-written program through Earth-time so that sentient, time-restricted beings may experience what You've already concocted. The only way You can be Who You Are and still help the non-God beings grasp essential contrast such as love and hate, law and grace, death and life, darkness and light, is to blame people for doing bad things that You made them do. As God, that's just the way it is for You. It's the God-normal. There is no other way to operate without denying Your Deity, and what purpose is there in denying such an undeniable fact? It's a "conundrum" that only God could experience, so of course it's not a conundrum at all because God simply announces that He blames those He hardens and that's the end of the matter—or should be. Any questions? Apparently so. *Idiots*.

The assumption is that blaming is evil. In the short term in may be, but the long term proves everything to be good. Getting blamed is just another life lesson. It's only a way-station on the road to healing, completeness, fulfillment. Now we get to see what happens after bad, blamed people appear in court before the Merciful One. What happens is that the Merciful One (sometimes referred to as the Judge), after returning the hearts of the blamed to their original conditions (that is, relieving them of their temporary roles), ends up acquitting and justifying them (Romans 5:18). This is the juncture of the eonian times when God becomes all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). The hardened people have played their involuntary roles, the roles are retired, and now the players are restored to their true selves. The new Judas, alive again and basking in God's favor, will say, "I was necessary; I served an important purpose," and there will be merit to that statement and sympathetic listeners to it. Pharaoh will say, "I was used by the God of the universe to highlight His glory and power." Many heads will nod knowingly. "But it wasn't all easy," Pharaoh will continue, "believe me, and am I ever glad to have a soft heart again." Much handshaking will ensue, as well as tips of hats and the indulgence of adult beverages. God ends up being merciful. Well what do you know. You mean just like He said He was?

"BECAUSE OF THE WONDERFUL THINGS HE DOES"

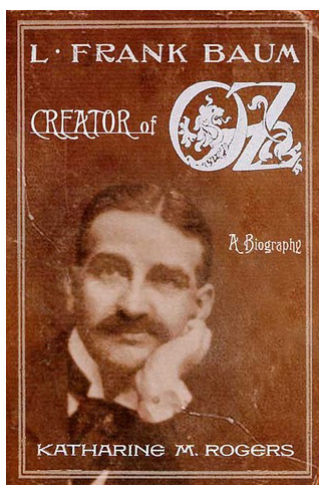
L. Frank Baum wrote *The Wizard of Oz* in 1900, and then thirty-nine years later director Victor Fleming put it to film. Seventy-seven years down *that* yellow brick road, audiences continue to immerse themselves in the drama between evil and good, hate and love, sin and salvation, death and life. Thus engaged, they gladly choose to forget that the film is the result of a screenplay written by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf. They put from their minds that the fantastic Oz was in fact a collection of sets at MGM studios on 10202 W. Washington Blvd. in Culver City, California. They don't want to know that Margaret Hamilton, the Cleveland-born actress who portrayed the Wicked Witch of the West



in the film, was in need of money at the time and took the role to help support her son. It's an unwanted consideration, while watching the film, to think that the same person commanding flying monkeys and hurling fireballs at the scarecrow drives to work each morning at 4 a.m. with a cup of coffee in hand, fighting traffic on La Cienega Boulevard. Viewers of the film gladly suspend their knowledge of a real, behind-the-scenes world in order to steep themselves in the Merry Old Land of Oz.

Consider yourself to be living in God's version of this classic film. Some of the players in this production that we call life realize that we walk, talk and struggle our way through a pre-written, pre-planned production. Others have yet to be apprised of that. Looking back at our history, some understand Pharaoh to have been a pre-scripted, temporary antagonist to the hero (Moses), who will one day be relieved of his difficult role. Others imagine that Pharaoh cast *himself* as a hard-hearted ruler and that he will be lost for eternity. Still considering now the broad scope of earthly existence, some folks actually believe that this is a mindless, unscripted foray into speculation and chance where even the director chews his nails in dread apprehension of what may occur next. (Are you *kidding* me?)

A WRITER IS A WRITER



Who attacks L. Frank Baum for writing both protagonists and antagonists into his book? No one blames Baum for destroying the very evil character (the witch) that was born out of his own pen. We thank him for it. We thank him both for the creation of the memorable though villainous character, and for her vanquishing. Were he to have

brought her back to life and healed her (as God will do with His temporary enemies), we'd have thanked him for that. But God? We curse him for the same thing for which we laud Baum. God is attacked for writing and directing a production that makes *The Wizard of Oz* look like poor neighborhood theater. Not one actor in *The Wizard of Oz* said to Victor Fleming on the set in Culver City, "Why have you made me this way?" They knew going in what Fleming and the writers were asking of them. Having read the script, they could have rejected their parts. None of them did. Players on the great stage of *this* life, of course, are not so advantaged. We haven't the luxury of either accepting or rejecting a script. We only find out later (well, some of us do) that there even *is* a script. Those still in the dark on this count continue believing that they have crafted and are

directing themselves in an unscripted plot that is unfolding—absolutely—in real-time, to the suspense of all.

"MY PRETTY"

Margaret Hamilton, script in hand, rightly feared what the role of the hard-hearted witch would do to her. From Wikipedia:

When asked about her experiences on the set of *The Wizard of Oz*, Hamilton said that her biggest fear was that her monstrous film role would give children the wrong idea of who she really was. In reality, she cared deeply about children, frequently giving to charitable organizations. She often remarked about children coming up to her and asking her why she had been so mean to poor Dorothy. She appeared on an episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood in 1975, where she explained to children that she was only playing a role, and showed how putting on a costume "transformed" her into the witch. She also made personal appearances, and Hamilton described the children's usual reaction to her portrayal of the Witch: "Almost always they want me to laugh like the Witch. And sometimes when I go to schools, if we're in an auditorium, I'll do it. And there's always a funny reaction, like 'Ye gods, they wish they hadn't asked.' They're scared. They're really scared for a second. Even adolescents. I guess for a minute they get the feeling they got when they watched the picture. They like to hear it but they don't like to 'hear' it. And then they go, 'Ohhhhhhh-hhh...!' The picture made a terrible impression of some kind on them, sometimes a ghastly impression, but most of them got over it, I guess...because when I talk like the Witch, and when I laugh, there is a hesitation and then they clap."

Margaret Hamilton played the Wicked Witch of the West so well that, for years, children feared her. She labored to convince them of her true self, then struck upon an idea. As Margaret Hamilton, she would laugh as the witch, causing the children to associate the nice lady before them with the movie character. It was initially a strain on the movie-conditioned brains of the children, but they eventually appreciated the difference between temporary evil and permanent good. The role of the witch was temporary. Margaret Hamilton was the permanent good.

God's enemies in this life are as real as can be; it is the *roles* that are temporary. The eventual deliverance of the characters from these roles, however, will be no less real than the roles themselves. Few people ask the ever-important question, "What happens when the movie is over?"



SWEET REMINISCE

Ray Bolger played the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*. Everyone loves the kindly man of straw in search of brains. For the rest of his life, fans of the film flocked to Ray. In his case, the sweet-hearted scarecrow reflected Ray's real-life disposition. (Yet even this was a God-given role; a gift.) Unlike Hamilton's experience, children gazed lovingly upon him.

After the making of *The Wizard of Oz*, Hamilton and Bolger remained friends for life. I like to imagine them sitting together, years later at Ray's house, discussing their roles in *The Wizard of Oz*. Back in the day they were arch enemies. Now, here they sat as the dearest of friends.

I like to think of Moses and Pharaoh in the same way, sitting together and reminiscing on a far-future occasion. I can almost hear Pharaoh saying, "My biggest fear, Moses, was that my monstrous role would give people the wrong idea about who I really was, that they would forget that I was a creature once pure from the hand of God, Whose very hand twisted me to suit His chosen role for me." Moses—the Ray Bolger of Exodus—would surely thank God for the gift of never having to battle such an awful stereotype. This knowledge would lend Moses a heartfelt sympathy, I think, for his former "on-screen" nemesis.

I do like to picture—and I believe I will one day see—these former combatants relaxing in the "all in all" that they will one day become in God. Then, in the light of God's glory and grace, they will reminisce over "the old days" of necessary contrast, when God required the battling of contrary characters. Each man will then bask and abound in full acceptance of his role, understanding that at no time during the Great Production was the script or the direction ever in their hands. All will be known then; all will be understood. The applause of an appreciative audience will drown out all painful memories. In the glow of God's light, all will appreciate—players and viewers alike—the time when men and women played such disparate yet necessary roles in the Classic of All Time.

Of the increase of this drama—that is, of the good that shall come to all because of this life—there shall be no consummation. For the good shall endure long after this production has slammed shut, forever, its studio doors. —MZ

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