

Appendix

'The elect' and 'the hardened'

This Appendix¹ sets out the reasoning behind my conclusions concerning 'the elect' and 'the hardened' in Romans 9 – 11. Paul divides Israel into two: 'the elect' and 'the hardened', the composition of each group being determined by God's decree.² This division is fundamental to the understanding of the passage. As the apostle makes clear, there is no possibility of any transfer from one group to the other; these two groups are mutually exclusive; the elect will come to glory, but the rest will suffer wrath. If this is forgotten, all sorts of trouble will ensue when we try to understand the apostle. Alas, it is forgotten – or ignored!

Two root words give rise to this concept of 'hardening' and 'hardness'; one in Romans 11:7,25, the other in Romans 9:18 ('stubbornness' in Romans 2:5). We are talking about being 'covered with a thick skin, hardened by covering with a callus, growing hard or callous, becoming dull, losing the power of understanding', or being 'rough, stern, hard, obstinate, stubborn'.

In Scripture, being 'hardened' sometimes speaks of a blindness which can be reversed (Mark 6:52; 8:17; 2 Cor. 3:14-16). At other times – in our passage – it speaks of God judicially blinding the sinner with a hardness which cannot be reversed. Sometimes, we are not sure (Mark 3:5; John 12:40; Eph. 4:18-19).

In Romans 9 – 11, Paul uses 'the hardened' to delineate those who are not elect; in other words, the reprobate, those who are irreversibly blinded, judicially hardened. Take: 'God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden' (Rom. 9:18). In the context of Romans 9, it is clear that Paul is thinking of the elect and the non-elect. The same goes for: 'There is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What

¹ I will write as if it is being read at the appropriate place in the main text.

² The same could be said of Gentiles; indeed, all men. But it is Israel which concerns Paul here.

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then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened' (Rom. 11:5-7). Here we have it: 'the elect' and 'the others', 'the elect' and 'the hardened'.

Of course, all the elect, before conversion, are dead in sin, hostile to God, blinded and hardened in the lesser sense (Eph. 2:1-3). Even so, the elect are never hardened in the judicial sense, and the hardened (in the judicial sense) are never elect; there is no possibility of it. Speaking of Israel, the elect, the remnant, will be saved, whereas the non-elect, the hardened, will not be saved, cannot be saved. It is in this judicial sense of 'hardened' that the apostle speaks in Romans 11. The context makes this very clear.

Many get this wrong. They think that some of 'the hardened' Jews – indeed, some go so far as to think that *all* 'the hardened' Jews – will be saved in a coming day, maybe calling that time 'the last days'. This is quite wrong in this context, wrong on two counts.

First, the remnant are the elect; only the elect will be saved; God will *not* save the elect *and* some more in addition to the elect. While all 'the elect' will be saved, 'the 'hardened' can never be saved. Never!

And what biblical justification is there for distinguishing between 'this present age' and 'the last days'? None! 'The last days' began with the first coming of Christ (Heb. 1:1-2). Peter knew he was in 'the last days' when he preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-17). John could say: 'It is the last hour' (1 John 2:18). 'The last days' or 'later times' or the 'latter times' or 'the last time' or 'these last times' or 'the last times' all refer to the gospel age (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18). Christ has come 'at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26); 'the fulfilment of the ages has come' upon us (1 Cor. 10:11). There is no biblical warrant whatsoever for distinguishing between 'this age' and 'the last days'.

So, then, we have this *permanent* divide within Israel: 'the elect' and 'the hardened'.

But there are some verses in Romans 11 which seem, at first glance, to teach that the hardening can be reversed. For a start, what about the 'stumbling', the 'falling', and, the 'recovery' of Romans 11:11-24? Do these words not teach that while 'the

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hardened' stumbled or fell, at least some of them can be restored and will be restored? In other words, that the hardening is not permanent and irreversible? I quote the relevant words:

Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression... If their transgression means... and their loss means... how much greater riches will their fullness bring!... If their rejection is... what will their acceptance be... And if they [who fell] do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.

I will deal with these verses in detail when we reach them. All I want to do here is show that they do not refute what I have said about 'the elect' and 'the hardened'.

Israel as a whole stumbled and fell, Israel as a whole was cut out of the olive tree, and Gentiles were grafted in.³ So says the apostle. But, as he also says, if any Jew comes to faith he will be grafted into the tree; that is, he will be saved. (And, it is true to say, that if any Gentile does not believe he will be damned). Clearly, in this illustration the apostle is speaking from the sinner's point of view; that is, if the sinner believes he will be saved. In other words, Paul is not saying that 'the hardened' can be turned into 'the elect', but that unbelievers can become believers.

The fact remains, however, that those who are not elected are blinded and hardened, and this state of affairs is irreversible and permanent. Romans 11:11-24 does not teach the opposite. It could not! The hardened Jews (as much as hardened Gentiles) are non-elect, and will never be saved. The hardened are not elect. Therefore they *must* be ruined (Rom. 11:22; 1 Cor. 10:12; Heb. 4:11). And this applies as much to Jews as to Gentiles. Paul's point in Romans 11:11-24 is that if any sinner trusts Christ, he will be saved. He can only come to faith, however, because God has elected him to salvation from eternity past (John 6:37,44,65; 8:47; 10:26-28; 17:2,24; 2 Tim. 1:8-9). And, by his believing, he demonstrates that he is elect (1 Thess. 1:4-10), and, therefore, not one of 'the hardened'.

³ This does not mean that every Jew from that time is damned, and every Gentile is saved!

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Now for another objection: What about Romans 11:25-26? 'Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved'. Does Paul mean that, at a certain date in the future, some of 'the hardened' will be saved, that some of 'the hardened' will become part of 'the elect'? After all, 'the hardened' belong to Israel, and 'all Israel' will be saved.

Since the apostle has made it clear that 'the hardened' in this context will never have their hardness removed (and there is no suggestion that he changes his tune just before writing verses 25 and 26), these verses cannot possibly teach that God will save not only the elect in Israel but also some (at least) of the hardened. Moreover, there is no possibility whatsoever that God will save his elect and then elect some more.⁴ He never turns vessels of wrath into vessels of mercy (Rom. 9:14-24). I am not saying that God does not take sinners out of Adam and bring them into Christ, but, in the context of Romans 11, 'the elect' and 'the hardened' are always contrasted, mutually exclusive. 'God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden' (Rom. 9:18). Hardening, here, is the antithesis of election, including in its ultimate effect. We must stick with this throughout Romans 11. Just as 'the elect' *must* be saved, so 'the hardened' *can never* be saved. God has determined the election and the hardening, and the two are mutually exclusive, and permanently so. The elect will be saved, and no others. In particular, 'the hardened' among the Jews will never be saved. This must not be watered down.

Paul has already stated, unequivocally, that 'though the number of the Israelites be like the sand of the sea, *only* the remnant will be saved' (Rom. 9:27), and this must not be forgotten when we get to these verses. However we interpret Romans 11:25-26, it must be consistent with Romans 9:27: 'Only the remnant will be saved'. Certainly, the former must not blow the latter out of the water. Only the elect can or will be saved; the rest are hardened. 'What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did... The

⁴ I know this prayer is frequently attributed to C.H.Spurgeon, but I should like to be given the *original* reference. If he prayed it, his theology was haywire at this point.

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others were hardened’, as Paul made clear (Rom. 11:7-10). And this still applies when we reach Romans 11:25-26. Hardening, blindness, here, is contrasted with election; and both are permanent and irreversible. The great question – the question Paul asks – is this: ‘Since Israel is divided irreversibly into two – the elect and the hardened – and Israel as a whole has stumbled, what will God make of that stumbling?’ Whatever Romans 11:25-26 teaches, it cannot be made to teach that ‘the hardened’ will be saved. When we come to the verses in the course of my exegesis, I will fully argue my case.

Right from Romans 9:6, the apostle has made it perfectly clear that there are these two strands to Israel (as to the entire human race); namely, the elect and the rest. See Isaiah 65:8-16. The sovereign will of God has marked out these two strands, and the divide between them is fixed, and fixed eternally. The hardened, ‘the objects of his wrath’, are ‘prepared for destruction’; the elect, ‘the objects of his mercy’, are ‘prepared... for glory’. And this is so for both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 9:22-24). We are never told that this judicial hardening can be reversed. The very idea makes a nonsense of Romans 9 – 11. From the point of view of election, Ishmael cannot be made into Isaac, Esau cannot be made into Jacob, Pharaoh cannot become a Moses; a vessel of wrath cannot be made into a vessel of mercy, a vessel prepared for noble purposes cannot become a vessel for ignoble purposes (2 Tim. 2:20), the Sodom-like bulk of Israel cannot be turned into the remnant (Rom. 9:6-29).

Of course, God can – and does – turn the ungodly into the godly and so on, but when we speak of ‘the elect’ and ‘the hardened’ in the context of Romans 11 we are not talking about conversion from the point of view of sinners; we are talking about God’s decrees. And God’s decrees are irreversible and final. As Paul said: ‘God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable’ (Rom. 11:29). This takes us full circle and closes the ring: ‘It is not as though God’s word had failed’ (Rom. 9:6) – for both ‘election’ and for ‘hardening’! And we are not talking in terms of the corporate only. Corporate Israel is made up of individual Israelites. To be ‘hardened’ is permanent: permanently hardened individuals can

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never be saved. God's decree is immutable – 'irrevocable', the apostle's very word (Rom. 11:29).

One final comment: only God knows who the elect and the hardened are. A man (Jew or Gentile) may be an unbeliever today, but this does not mean he is not elect and therefore hardened. He may be 'hard' but not be 'hardened'.⁵ It is the elect and the hardened who are mutually exclusive groups. And who is in these two groups is secret, known only unto God (Deut. 29:29). The point here, however, is that the hardened do not turn into the elect!

In conversion, we must speak of 'believers' and 'unbelievers'; in God's decrees, we must speak of 'the elect; and 'the hardened'. Both groups are covered by Deuteronomy 29:29. God's decrees are part of 'the secret things'. Paul did not know who the elect and the hardened were before the elect came to faith, and, therefore, he desired the salvation of all (especially, in this context, all Jews, Romans 9:1-4; 10:1; 11:13-14), and he offered Christ to all (Jews and Gentiles). And when I say 'offered', I mean the whole range of gospel addresses to sinners: the apostle commanded, urged, invited, pleaded with, exhorted, persuaded, sinners to trust Christ, assuring them of a welcome if they came to the Saviour. And so on.⁶

Surprising as it may seem at first glance, in all this talk about election and hardening, let us not forget that Paul presses on with his desire to see as many Jews as possible converted to Christ. Right from the start of Romans 9 – 11, and right at its heart – a passage which is so clear and categorical on election – we have the apostle's passion for the conversion of the lost (Rom. 9:1-4; 10:1; 11:13-14). Do not forget the positive point in all this: despite everything, the elect, including – in the context, *especially* – the Jews, will be saved!

⁵ As above, all the elect were once as dead in sins as the non-elect (Eph. 2:1-3).

⁶ See my *Offer*.