

Romans 9:18 Finding God's Plan for Your Life

by Ernest O'Neill

The sermon explores the concept of free will in relation to God's mercy and the consequences of rejecting it, using biblical examples to illustrate these themes.

Scripture: Genesis 2:16, Exodus 5:1, Deuteronomy 30:19, 2 Samuel 11:2, Psalm 51:17, John 3:16

Topics: "Free Will", "Gods Sovereignty"

Description

Ernest O'Neill preaches about the destructive power of the words 'I can't' and the false beliefs of determinism and fatalism that hinder us from realizing our true potential. He emphasizes the importance of understanding our free will and ability to choose our own paths, as revealed by God throughout history. O'Neill highlights the misconception of God's arbitrary nature in Romans 9:18 and explains that God shows mercy to all but hardens the hearts of those who reject Him.

Transcript

INTRODUCTION

1. There are two words in our language that cause all of us here more unhappiness, depression and frustration than any others. Do you know what they are? "I CAN'T". Probably all of us here have found ourselves lying under the ton of depression and defeat that these two words can lay upon us-in the morning when we should get up, at the table when we should stop eating, in the midst of anxiety when we should stop worrying, in the midst of vocational or academic difficulties-we are defeated not by the task itself but by this rising tide of defeatism and helplessness within us expressed by these two words: "I CAN'T"!
2. Psychologists like Skinner, who urge us to see ourselves as machines that have been irrevocably programmed by our origins and environments so that our actions and choices and lives are predetermined, reinforce this sense of helplessness and hopelessness about mastering our circumstances. Really, determinists like him are just modern versions of the priests of all the eastern pseudo religions who treat man's fallen state as normal and therefore believe utterly in fatalism: that we human being are being moved unavoidably by impersonal forces against which we cannot possibly exercise our wills.
3. So we are being prepared by this kind of false ancient and modern brainwashing to submit docilely to the totalitarian powers that will increasingly dominate our world and eventually to the totalitarian rule of

anti-Christ who will absolutely trample our free wills.

4. This view of mankind is, of course, wrong and is repeatedly contradicted by the ways Our Creator has revealed Himself down through the centuries: some of the first words ever spoken by Our God to our forefathers clearly show that we have free wills and can exercise them: Genesis 2:16-17; 3:6. Again and again He speaks through His prophets to us and implies that we have freedom and ability to choose our own way: Deuteronomy 30:19. John 3:16 states that anyone can believe-it depends on their own wills: Jesus wept over Jerusalem because it would not do what He wanted it to. The reason for Jesus' death was that God was committed to preserving our free wills so that He would have friends who really loved Him and not robot-prisoners who could do nothing else. So the whole thrust of the view we get of our God through Jesus is victorious. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

5. Because this dear book stands alone in the world as the originator of this freedom and ability we have-to be and do whatever we want-it's important to deal firmly and explicitly with the verse we're studying today: Romans 9:18

MISINTERPRETATION

1. Because many of us have a way of forgetting all the other verses in the Bible that show clearly Jesus' blessing the children, or God forgiving a person for the 700th time, or Elijah saying: "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve...Baal or God" -and forgetting that one verse has to be read in the light of all the other verses and the general thrust of the Bible, we allow ourselves to be influenced by determinism and fatalism and predestination and we adopt "tunnel" vision when we come to these words and say: "But there it is-in black and white-"God has mercy on whom He wants, and He hardens the heart of whomever He wants". In other words, God sits up in heaven and decides: "I'm going to have mercy and forgive John and Peter and everyone with three freckles on their noses--and I'm going to make hard so that they won't accept by mercy, Jim and Mary, and other individuals that I will arbitrarily choose."

2. First, let us see that, if this verse means that God is this kind of arbitrary, fickle heartless tyrant who plays with us as if we were puppets or robots, then it is a complete and utter contradiction of the picture we get of Him in Jesus as He weeps over Jerusalem because they were rejecting His best wishes for them. If Jesus, God's Son, wanted Jerusalem to do something--then according to this interpretation of Romans 9:18, He was able to make them do it. But instead of this we see our Creator's Son weeping real tears of heartache and sorrow and pain because Jerusalem would not do what He knew was best for it.

3. What then does this verse mean? Briefly: "God has mercy on whomever He wills-which is everybody because elsewhere in the Bible He says it is not His will that any should perish-and He hardens the conscience of those who reject His mercy and harden their wills against Him."

4. This interpretation is precisely illustrated in the history of Pharaoh, king of Egypt: Exodus 5:1-2. Repeatedly God showed mercy to Pharaoh by sending Moses to him to plead again and again that he would do what God wanted. He even sent, you remember, supernatural plagues of blood, frogs, lice and flies to ensure that Pharaoh knew that he was dealing with the Creator of the universe, and Pharaoh actually came to realise this: Exodus 9:27. But the Egyptian king continued to reject God's mercy (verse 34). Only then, after it was plain to all that Pharaoh had hardened his own will against God 10 times and had chosen to reject God's will of his own volition--only then did God strengthen his courage so that he persisted in doing what his will wanted to do. It's good to see, too, that though we translate three Hebrew words by the one English word "harden", yet it is Pharaoh that in Hebrew is said to make his heart

stubborn, NOT God. God is said only to strengthen his courage so that he was outwardly what he really was inwardly.

5. Away at the beginning of the whole series of events God foresaw what was in Pharaoh's heart and knew that, whatever He did, Pharaoh was determined to reject God's mercy and therefore God would end up withdrawing His softening grace from Pharaoh's conscience and His offer of repentance from the king: Exodus 4:21. This foreknowledge proved true because after the first five plagues when Pharaoh alone hardened his own heart or will, during the last five plagues we read of God taking part in that hardening of his conscience by withdrawing the grace of penitence so that Pharaoh became more and more blind and dead to God's voice.

US

1. This is exactly what happens to us! We find ourselves in the same kind of situation as was described by David in the lesson we read earlier in the service (2 Samuel 11:2-5, 14-15; 12:1-9) It was a beautiful day and he walked out on the roof of the palace, grateful to His Creator and his heart soft towards Him when he looked down and saw a beautiful woman bathing. God's Spirit within him rose in gratitude for the gift of beauty but his own spirit sank as his emotions longed for the exhilaration that they could get apart from God. God's spirit warned David of the danger of looking again, but David made his will stubborn and stared at Bathsheba; God showed mercy by forgiving this and convicting him of sin, but David rejected God's mercy and hardened his will enough to send his servant to enquire who she was. God again showed His mercy by the plain report that she was the wife of Uriah, one of his own soldiers, but David became more stubborn and determined to have his way and committed adultery with her. Once more God had mercy in showing him the heinousness of the sin in that Jewish law forbade intercourse at this time. Then a son was born and God yielded to David's determination in hardening his will and He in turn withdrew His softening Spirit from his conscience. Then David became a monster and arranged the murder of Uriah so that he could have his wife permanently.

2. So with us-you know it's true: we all like to think that the serpent was right in his words to Eve: "You shall not surely die"; we like to think that we can control our sense of God's presence and approval and forgiveness but we can't-we can control only our wills. We can accept or reject His mercy, obey or disobey His will-after that He hardens our conscience or softens it, hardens our spirit or softens it.

3. Whom does God accept? "Him that has a contrite and broken spirit". We like to think we can sin or disobey God and yet maintain "a broken and a contrite spirit"-BUT we cannot because God hardens those who reject His mercy-you do, in fact, sow a thought and reap an action, sow an action and reap a habit, sow a habit and reap a character. There are spiritual laws built into our natures by God that ensure that every time we are sarcastic or critical or unclean or harsh, we become a little harder, and find it a little easier to do it next time-a little more blind to how wrong it is-a little more insensitive to how it hurts the other person. This hardness to sensitivity we cannot control. The only thing we can control is the hardness of our wills.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ernest-o'neill/romans-918-finding-gods-plan-for-your-life/>

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