

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 13

Halifax, 14 October 2007

Q. 13 What hath God especially decreed concerning angels and men?

A. God, by an eternal and immutable decree, out of His mere love, for the praise of His glorious grace, to be manifested in due time, hath elected some angels to glory; and, in Christ, hath chosen some men to eternal life and the means thereof, and also, according to His sovereign power, and the unsearchable counsel of His own will (whereby He extendeth or withholdeth favour as He pleaseth) hath passed by, and foreordained the rest to dishonour and wrath, to be for their sin inflicted, to the praise of the glory of his justice.

Introduction:

It is clear that Question 13 (which I just read to you) flows out of Question 12, which we looked at last week.

- Question 12 introduces you to the doctrine of God’s decrees...
 - We saw that by calling them “acts of the counsel of His will,”
 - the decrees are shown to be His acts of planning out what He will do.
 - We saw that the plan was made in advance and that it is completely God’s—no one or nothing influenced Him or caused Him to alter what He had once determined...
 - We also saw that the plan was all inclusive—He “works all things after the counsel of His own will” (Eph 1:11).
 - His decree has to do with everything that happens—“whatsoever comes to pass in time.”

But there is a phrase added at the end of the answer to Q. 12 that is preparatory to Q. 13:

- It says, that God has “unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time, (and here is the preparatory phrase) **especially concerning angels and men.**”
 - What does it mean—“especially concerning angels and men?”
 - If God has decreed everything that comes to pass, from the seemingly random motion of atoms to the decisions of kings,
 - why is He said to have **especially** foreordained that which pertains to angels and men?
- I would suggest that the Catechism is suggesting that God’s chief concern is with His rational creatures...

- And that all other things are subservient to the purposes He works with these rational creatures...
 - His focus is not on what he does with potatoes or hurricanes for the sake of potatoes or hurricanes...
 - but as they affect men and angels and the ultimate purpose He has for them.

And as you can see, Q. 13 turns to that topic—

- Q. 13. What hath God especially decreed concerning angels and men?

You see that the answer to this question speaks of the election and the reprobation of both men and angels for God's glory...

- Those that are elected are elected to glory and eternal life...
 - Mercy is brought on them for the demonstration of God's love and grace...to show how loving and gracious He is...
- Those that are not elected are foreordained to dishonour and wrath for their sins...
 - Wrath is brought on them for the purpose of demonstrating the glory of God's justice—to show how just He is in punishing them for their sins.

As we examine this topic tonight, I want to tell you from the start that I am going to focus especially on God's decree concerning the election and reprobation of men.

- However, I will mention that in 1 Tim 5:21 we have a reference to elect angels and in Jude 6, we are told of angels who “did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode.”
 - This seems to show us that there are both elect angels and reprobate angels...
 - I will have more to say about angels in future sermons,
 - but tonight, I want to concentrate on the election and reprobation of human beings.

So with that purpose in mind, let us turn to our scripture reading for tonight,

- READ> Romans 9:1-26
- In this passage, the Holy Scripture very frankly presents the doctrine of the decree of election of some and reprobation of others, and that for God's glory.
 - This is a passage that is often either ignored (I heard of one pastor who was preaching through Romans and simply skipped chapter 9)—
 - it is either ignored or twisted to say things very different than what it actually says.

- But because it is the very word of God, I want to admonish you to take it for what it says.
 - It may rub you the wrong way, but it is still God's word and it is still truth.
 - Whatever you may think about the matter will not stand unless what you think conforms to God's word.
 - It is our duty, not to chafe against scripture, but to humbly accept it and to renew our minds under it as the authoritative Word of God.

Romans 9 begins (in the first 5 verses) with Paul's struggle concerning his fellow Israelites who continue to reject their Messiah.

- Paul yearns for them and prays with great earnestness for them,
 - knowing that to them pertains the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the law and the promises...
 - They have the benefits of the covenant, and Christ came as their Messiah to redeem them...
 - Yet, many of them—most of them—are not saved.
 - They have not come to Christ for salvation, but continue in rebellion.

In verse 6-13, Paul sets out to explain how this can be so—

- how it can be that those who were called and given the promises and the covenants and for whom Jesus came can be lost, strangers to Christ!
- And in explaining how this can be,
 - Paul shows us very clearly three doctrines that pertain to God's decrees concerning men...

- I. First, you are taught here that salvation is the result of God's decree to elect certain individuals and not others.**
- II. Secondly, you are taught here that there is no injustice in God's decree to save one and condemn another.**
- III. Thirdly, you are taught here that God's decrees concerning men are designed for the purpose of demonstrating His glory.**

Let's look at each of these lessons...

- I. First, you are taught here that salvation is the result of God's decree to elect certain individuals and not others.**
 - A. Isaac is mentioned to show that the promise was not to every last one of Abraham's seed without distinction, but only to those that God calls...

1. Ishmael was born to Abraham,
 - but being Abraham's seed did not make him a child of the promise.
 - God had promised to be God to Abraham and to the child that would be born to Sarah his wife, not to the child that was born to her maid!

2. Paul's point is that not every individual in Israel is saved because it is not God's purpose to save them...
 - The ones who are saved are the ones God calls...
 - "In Isaac shall your seed be called!"
 - They are the ones from among whom God will effectually call some.
 - The promise that God will save (therefore) is not to every last one of Abraham's seed, but to all those that God calls.
 - Therefore, when many in Israel are found to reject Christ, it is not because the promise of God has failed,
 - but because they have not been effectually called by God and therefore have not believed.
 - They have been outwardly called, but they have not been effectually called.
 - It should be understood that when Paul speaks of God's call in Romans, he refers to the effectual call.
 - The effectual call is the call that comes in conjunction with the working of God's Spirit to grant life to the elect...
 - to open their eyes to see their need of Christ and to renew them so that they will receive Him with true faith.

TRANS> The illustration of Isaac begins to show that salvation is the result of God's election...

B. But the illustration of Jacob states it in much stronger terms...

1. In this case, Jacob is set in contrast over against Esau...
 - when there is no basis for the acceptance of Jacob and the rejection of Esau that can be discerned by us...
 - a. First of all, they were both born to the same mother—so it cannot be said that one was the son of a bond woman as it was said of Ishmael...
 - b. Secondly, they were twins, born at the same time—and in fact Esau was born first so that it cannot be said that Jacob was chosen because he was born first.

- c. Thirdly, the acceptance of Jacob and the rejection of Esau was announced before they were even born so that it cannot be said that God's choice was based on anything good that Jacob did or evil that Esau did!
2. But perhaps most conclusively of all,
- we are expressly told that the reason God announced to Rebecca his choice of Jacob before the boys were born,
 - was that "the purpose of God according to election might stand"
 - Do you see that in verse 11?
 - God wanted to make it clear in all ages right from the start that His salvation was not based on works, but on His sovereign choice and calling.
 - The whole reason for doing things in the way He did with Jacob and Esau was to make it clear that salvation is His doing.
 - The reason many Israelites were not saved in the day of Paul was the same as the reason Esau was not saved...
 - Though born into a household of privilege and promise, he was not converted because God did not elect him and so did not call him.
3. Some who do not like what this passage is teaching try to escape it by claiming that Paul is speaking of nations rather than individuals here...
- a. But that doesn't solve a thing because nations are made up of individuals!
 - If God chose one nation based on election and rejected another nation based on sovereign decree,
 - that only goes to show that when Esau was rejected, many were rejected!
 - It doesn't change the fact that acceptance is based on election.
 - b. But what's more, the rejection that Paul is explaining with these illustrations is the rejection of Israelites who were all part of Israel according to the flesh...
 - He is not attempting to explain why one nation was chosen and another rejected,
 - but why one Israelite was in Christ and another was not...
 - The ultimate reason is that God elected and called the one and not the other.

TRANS> So you see then that Romans 9:6-13 clearly teaches that the salvation of one person and not another is the result of God's decree to elect the one and not the other.

II. Secondly, you are taught here that there is no injustice in God's decree to save one and condemn another.

A. The question of God's justice in choosing one and not the other is raised and then abruptly denied in verse 14...

- v. 14: **What shall we say then? *Is there* unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!**

1. This is the question that comes to the minds of man as soon as they hear that God elects some and passes by others...

a. They say, "but that's not fair!"

- Paul knows that this is the objection that is always raised, so he raises it before the detractors have a chance to raise it themselves.

b. And you see that he emphatically denies it!

- "Certainly not!"

- Of course there is no injustice with God.

2. But Paul does not leave it with only a raw denial—he explains why God cannot be accused of any injustice in saving one and passing by another...

a. The answer is given in verse 15 where the Lord is quoted as saying to Moses:

- "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy."

- That's the answer!

b. The point is that salvation is sheer mercy...

1) Mercy can only happen in a situation where there is no claim of justice...

- If you work for someone for a predetermined wage and they give you what was promised, it is not mercy—but justice that they paid you...

- They have given you what they owed you...

- But if you in sheer kindness decide to help the person who robbed you, murdering your wife and children in the process, simply because that person has fallen on hard times,

- it is an act of sheer mercy...

- The robber had no claim of justice...

- You gave him something he in no way deserved!

2) So it is that when God elects an individual to salvation,

- it is an act of sheer mercy...

- The individual has no claim on God...

- Nor can the one who is not elected cry up injustice for being passed by...
 - The demerit of us sinners against God is much greater than the demerit of the robber in the illustration I used before.
 - The reprobate have no claim on the justice of God—not in the least.
 - They can rightly claim that they did not receive mercy as others did,
 - they can claim that they were not treated equally,
 - but they cannot claim that they were treated unjustly.
3. Understand, therefore, that God is sovereign and free when it comes to election...
- a. There is no obligation on His part to show mercy to anyone—
 - In fact, it ought to be absolutely astounding to us that He does show mercy to any of the sons of Adam...
 - especially when we consider the price attached to His mercy!
 - It is very wrong of us, ungrateful creatures that we are,
 - to even suggest that there is injustice on God’s part for withholding mercy from some when it is such an unexpected mercy...
 - such an uncalled for mercy.
 - b. Verse 16 further shows that it is not only that God had to take the first step in providing salvation,
 - but that even after it is provided and we are shown it, we still do not come unless God has elected us...
 - It says:
 - “It is not of him wills nor of him who runs but of God who shows mercy.”
 - The implication is that if left to our own selves, we would never turn to God no matter how sweetly, sincerely, and convincingly salvation should be offered to us...
 - The Jews for whom Paul was so deeply concerned,
 - even though they were presented with a crucified and risen Messiah who had fulfilled all that the prophets had spoken,
 - would never come to Him for salvation unless God had mercy upon them.

- This makes it very clear that Paul is not talking about the fact that God had to show mercy by sending Christ and then that we do what we will with Him...that He only took the first step by sending Christ...
 - no—it is not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy...
 - The only reason one Jew is saved and the other is not is because one heard the gospel and one did not...
 - or because one had a good heart and the other an evil heart...
 - but because God had mercy on the one and not on the other.
 - Both had evil hearts that would not respond to start with, and it was only God’s call that changed that.
 - There is no injustice in this...
 - Neither the one who received mercy nor the one who did not receive mercy had any claim on God to start with.
 - Both deserve perdition.
- c. And my brothers and sisters, this is the real reason we have problems with this doctrine of God’s decrees...
 - It is because we can’t accept the fact that we really and truly deserve to be sent to hell.
 - We cry “injustice” when we learn that God has decreed that some sinners should perish because we don’t accept the fact that they fully deserve to perish—
 - and we don’t accept that they fully deserve to perish because we don’t accept the fact that we fully deserve to perish.
 - I rather think this may be one of the reasons why God reveals this doctrine of his electing decree to us—
 - because it forces us to reckon with the fact the we ourselves deserve to go to Hell when we see others just like us going to Hell.
 - It forces us to come to grips with the fact that the salvation we have received is of sheer mercy,
 - not of obligation.
- B. And so it is that verse 17 & 18 push us a little farther and speak of God actually hardening whom He will!
1. In both cases, salvation and reprobation, it is the sovereignty of God that decides what happens to the individual:

- v. 18: **“Therefore, He has mercy on whom He will, and whom He will, He hardens.”**
 - Pharaoh is used as an example of one that God hardened for His own purposes.
2. Hardening is not merely a passing over (though it is that), but it is an infliction of hardness upon an individual...
- a. But what kind of individual?
 - an individual who is just like every other individual...
 - an individual who is guilty before God and deserving of everlasting punishment from his very birth...
 - an individual just like you and me!
 - b. The hardening is a judicial act of God that He inflicts upon sinners—all of which deserve to be hardened and blinded!
 - In Pharaoh’s case, it was a hardening that made him behave in a most unreasonable way!
 - He acted contrary even to his own best temporal interests!
 - When told that his firstborn would die after nine other plagues had fallen on him exactly as prophesied,
 - the only reasonable thing would have been for Pharaoh to cry out for mercy and agree to release Israel before the plague fell...
 - but he had been hardened by God as a judgement so that He acted most unreasonably—
 - his behaviour was truly absurd—
 - the behaviour of one who was blinded in the depths of his rebellion...
 - Such is the case with many today who despite all evidence to the contrary, continue to believe in their God-denying lies about evolution or about the historical validity of Jesus Christ.
 - This is the judgement of God and there is no injustice in His inflicting it on men.
 - Every human being, fallen in Adam, deserves to be hardened, and not one deserves mercy...
 - yet, God has mercy on whom He will!

TRANS> That is the answer to the cry that it is unjust.

3. Yet another objection to God's sovereign decrees of election and hardening is raised and answered in 19-21.
 - a. The objection is given in verse 19:
 - v. 19: **You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"**
 - Now let's not forget that the reason God hardened them in the first place is only because they deserved it
 - (just as the ones to whom He shows mercy deserve to be hardened)
 - b. But Paul does not bother with repeating that...
 - 1) And he most certainly does not deny the premise of the objection that no one can resist God's will...
 - That premise is true...
 - That is exactly what he has been saying all along and he is not about to turn around and deny it now...
 - "He has mercy on whom He will, and whom He wills, He hardens."
 - No one resists His will. That's right...
 - He has already established the premise of the objection.
 - 2) So how does he answer it?
 - He simply tells the objector that he has no business questioning what God does...
 - That it is God's prerogative to do what He wishes with His creatures...
 - Here are the words he uses:
 - **Rom 9:20-21: But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?**
 - This should not be understood to say that men are mere clay...
 - That is not the point any more than it is the point that God is a mere potter!
 - The point is that God can use His creatures for His own purposes.
 - If He wishes to give sinful creatures what they deserve, it is His right to do it...

- If He wishes to show certain sinful creatures mercy, it is His right to do that as well.
- But it is not our right to argue with Him about it.

TRANS> But now having shown that God can justly do what He wants with us, we are now told why He does what He does with us...

- This leads to the third thing you are taught about God's decrees in Romans 9:

III. Thirdly, you are taught that God's decrees concerning men are designed for the purpose of demonstrating His glory.

A. It tells us first that God's purpose for the reprobate is to show His wrath and power upon them...

1. In verse 22, they are called vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.
 - The idea is that God makes use of sinful men and women to show everyone the glory of His judgement.
 - By punishing them for their sins,
 - He shows how much he abhors sin...

2. This is the way that God has chosen to show us His holiness and justice.
 - Pharaoh is an example of this that was already referred to back in verse 17.
 - The Lord hardened Pharaoh so that Pharaoh would foolishly try to resist the Lord...

 - God bore long with him in order that He might be glorified in bringing down the ten plagues upon Egypt and show the whole world His power and judgement.
 - The Lord actually pointed out to Pharaoh before He sent the hail that He might have sent pestilence to destroy him and his people all at once if He had wanted to do it...
 - but because He wanted to demonstrate His power upon Pharaoh in a more conspicuous way,
 - He chose to send plagues upon him instead—
 - which meant that He had to bear long with him before destroying him...
 - Incidentally, this served as a warning to Israel and to anyone else that is impenitent that God's longsuffering with them should not be understood as mercy...
 - It may well be that He is preparing them for an even greater display of His wrath and vindictive justice.

- Whatever the case, His purpose with the vessels of wrath is to show the glory of His power and justice by the way He deals with them.
- B. But then we are also told of God's purpose for the elect (which He calls vessels of mercy) in verse 23—
1. It is that He might make known the riches of His glory upon them...
 - **Rom 9:23-24: that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?**
 - By choosing them out from the mass of ruined, fallen sinners,
 - God makes His glorious grace all the more conspicuous for all to admire!
 - In this way, he makes His glory known to His creatures in a way that we can understand.
 2. The language seems to suggest, however, the destruction of the wicked is tied together with the display of His mercy to the elect...
 - Do you see how verse 22 and 23 are tied together...
 - His dealings with the vessels of wrath seem to contribute to the display of the riches of His glory upon the vessels of mercy?
 - The connection seems to be that by having someone just like you perish beside you and receive the full judgement of God as a vessel of wrath,
 - God's mercy is made all the more real and admirable to you!
 - The vessel of wrath that receives destruction stands as a reminder to you that you deserve the same...
 - and that but for the mercy of God brought to you through Jesus Christ, you would have had the very same end!
 - This is something that God has revealed to us,
 - and there is much to be gained from meditating on it.
 - Once we come to understand that we are unworthy of the least of God's mercies,
 - we will be in a proper frame of mind to truly appreciate His mercy.

The doctrine of God's decree concerning men and angels may be a difficult one for us to accept,

- but it is by no means unprofitable.
 - God has revealed it to us in order that we might learn that:

- **salvation is the result of God's decree to elect certain individuals and not others.**
- **that there no injustice in God's decree to save one and condemn another.**
- **that God's decrees concerning men are designed for the purpose of demonstrating His glory.**