

Judicial Hardening

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Born in South Wales, Dr. Lloyd-Jones trained at St. Bartholomew's Hospital and thereafter practiced as a physician and was assistant to the famous Lord Horder. After leaving medicine in 1927, he became the minister of a Welsh Presbyterian Church in Aberavon, South Wales. He was there until 1938 when he moved to London to share the ministry of Westminster Chapel in Buckingham Gate with the late Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, who retired in 1943. This ministry lasted for 30 years until Dr. Lloyd-Jones retired in August 1968. He then engaged in a wider preaching ministry and in writing until shortly before his death in 1981.

What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (according as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day. And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them: let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back alway. Romans 11:7-10

In these solemn verses the Apostle sums up what he has previously said in this chapter. We certainly are entering into the realm of ultimate mystery. Let us therefore 'take off our shoes from off our feet, for the place on which we stand is holy ground'. This is a passage that must be approached with reverence, with humility and with care. It does indeed hold us face to face with some of the most mysterious elements of biblical teaching, and of Christian teaching in particular. Let us bear in mind what the Apostle says at the end of the chapter. It is very applicable at this point — 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!'

Now that is the spirit and the way in which we must approach this. We are dealing with the mind and the ways of God and we must therefore anticipate that we shall not be able to understand it fully. But a man who rebels because he does not understand the mind of God is one who puts himself immediately into the very category, I say, of these Jews whose tragic case and condition we are

considering. Let us be careful. We are all too ready to speak our opinions and when we do not understand the mind of God we say that something seems to us to be wrong. That was the whole trouble with the Jews. God forbid, therefore, that we should be guilty of the terrible thing of which they were.

First of all, let us get clearly in our minds the basic point which the Apostle is making. He starts off by saying, 'What then?' — which means, 'What therefore?' In other words, 'What is the position in the light of what I have been saying?' His answer is that 'Israel' — that is to say the nation as a whole, 'Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for'.

The word 'seeketh' is most important because it means 'earnest seeking'. The Apostle fixed a preposition to the word that he used in order to give it emphasis. It was not a casual 'looking at' but 'an earnest and persistent seeking'. In addition, he uses the present tense to indicate that Israel was still doing so. What was being sought? Well, there is no question but that it must be 'righteousness'. They wanted to be right with God.

But he says that though they were 'earnestly and persistently seeking that, they had not got it, whereas, on the other hand 'the election hath obtained it'. Now here is a most interesting expression. He does not say 'the elect' have obtained it but 'the election'. Why? If he had said 'the elect hath obtained it' we would tend to think of the elect as individuals, and we might fall into the error of thinking that it was as the result of what they were in themselves and what they had done. But in order to obviate any such possibility the Apostle refers to them as 'the election'. This brings out the great point that it was because of what someone else had done that they had obtained it. This term emphasizes the one who 'elects' rather than any choice made by the people and so all the glory is to be given to God alone. The term also describes people corporately rather than individually and that is relevant to the whole argument.

The statement goes on to say 'and the rest' which means all in the nation apart from those chosen, 'were blinded'. We must look at this word 'blinded' because all the commentators point out that it really should be translated 'hardened'. While that is so, the Authorized Version translators had a good reason for translating it as 'blinded' as they did in 2 Corinthians 3:14, a parallel chapter, where we read, 'But their minds were blinded'. I think we can justify this rendering in Romans by pointing out that in the quotation which the Apostle immediately adduces there is a reference to blindness: 'According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see'. It means, you see, that a callous mask has come over the eyes, and prevented their seeing. Why should there not be an opacity in the eye as well as hardening of the heart? There is, and he goes on from his quotations to elaborate that point. But the thing for us to notice is that this verb is in the passive voice, they 'were blinded'. We will have to come back to this.

In verses 8 to 10 the Apostle substantiates his basic statement and he does a most extraordinary thing. In the eighth verse he takes a number of quotations from the Scripture and out of them he produces one fresh kind of statement. Here again is another instance of the divine inspiration of the Apostle. The same Spirit who had indited the original statements is here governing this great Apostle, and He is bringing the same meaning out of the three in the form of this one composite declaration. The verses quoted are Isaiah 29:10; Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 6:9.

Now what does Paul say? He says that 'God hath given them the spirit of slumber'. This means that God had produced a kind of torpor or numbness in them. The meaning of the word he uses refers to an inability to use one's faculties. If you are under the influence of a drug, you will be dimly aware of things happening around you, but you will not be able to understand them. You are not completely unconscious but you are not fully conscious either and it is the highest faculties of seeing, hearing, and understanding that are affected.

What the Apostle is saying is this: Israel has been in this condition before. We have these examples of it even in the time of Moses and the time of Isaiah, and it was still happening in Paul's day. He says there was nothing new about this; and unfortunately, it is still happening. It is the explanation of the fact that the majority of the nation of Israel, all indeed apart from the remnant according to the election of grace, are refusing the gospel and are outside the Christian church.

He quotes from Psalm 69 verses 22 and 23 in verses 9 and 10 which read, 'And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them: Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back away'. Now here again is a most important, and, at the same time, difficult statement. David refers to their table which of course means the things that are on it and not the table as such. They have a table laden with food and drink, everything that could be desired. David says let all that become a trap to them, and here, of course, he uses illustrations that an agricultural community would understand so well, the gins and the traps used for catching birds and other animals. These traps would be set and the poor animal would go along unsuspectingly, and suddenly the trap or the snare would catch them. There is no point in going into the distinction between the two words. They are used in order to bring out the imagery in its fulness.

But the significant word is 'recompence' rather than trap' or 'snare', or even 'stumblingblock'. A recompence means that what is happening is by way of a reward for evil done. In other words, what is in view is that they might reap the consequences of their own recalcitrance and obduracy towards the truth of God. What David was praying was that the very benefits that they were receiving from God might become a punishment and a hindrance to them.

Now what does he mean by the table? Well I think this is most important for us. He is saying something like this. Confronted with this kind of condition, David asked God to turn His blessings into a curse. The table stands for the material benefits and spiritual blessing.

There are terrible instances of this very thing in the Old Testament. One reads like this: 'And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul'. That is found in Psalm 106:15, where the psalmist was reviewing the long story of the children of Israel. 'They believed his words; they sang his praise. They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel: But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert'. This was the cry for meat, you remember, and the quails were sent to them and so on, but this is how he sums it up — 'He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul'. He gave them prosperity. Their bodies became fat but their souls became lean.

Now that is a part of this statement before us, 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them'. Now I do not think that we can confine this only to the material benefits associated with God's taking of them into the land of Canaan, 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. Their table was loaded. But it became a curse to them.

But God had given them spiritual blessings. As Paul has said, they were given God's 'lively oracles'. Indeed, he had given them 'the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises' [Rom. 9:4-5]. All that is included too. And David's petition is, that these things which they have abused and misused 'may become a snare and a trap' and a kind of evil recompence to them. And this is the very thing, of course, that was true of the children of Israel. It had been partially fulfilled in the past but the Apostle's point is that the real fulfilment was in his day.

He then adds to that this picture: 'Let their eyes be darkened that they may not see' — this is spiritual blindness; and then, 'bow down their back away' — this is the picture of an old man, bent, having lost his strength.

Now then what does this mean? The principle that he is putting before us is this; if we do not obey God, God's very blessings will become a curse to us. Is not that a part of the explanation of the state of the church and of this country at the present time? The Christian church became big, important and wealthy in the nineteenth century and was no longer a despised little sect. I believe that became a curse to her and that we are inheriting something of the consequences of that. The terrible thing is this — that even God's blessings, if you look at them in the wrong way and abuse them, they will become a curse to you. That is why tradition is something about which we always ought to be most careful. You look at the long history of the church and you will generally find this, that places which at one time enjoyed unusual blessings are today some of the most barren places in the universe.

Now I happen to know particular instances of that. I was brought up in a place where a mighty man of God was preaching two hundred years ago, the great Daniel Rowland of whom Bishop Ryle said that he was the greatest preacher since the Apostles. Daniel Rowland preached there for fifty years and that place used to experience heaven upon earth, Sunday by Sunday and on other occasions. Now I find it very difficult to think of any place known to me at the present time that is so spiritually dead, and I have no doubt that the explanation is that they tended to live on the tradition. I could name you other places. This has happened to many individual chapels. They have been blessed, God has loaded the table, but the very blessing has become a curse to them, even though the blessing has been the Word of God — the law, the gospel, God's own Word!

So you see it includes all that. The 'table' may mean not only material gifts and blessings from God, it may mean God's own Word, God's richest blessing — that can become a curse to the people. These were the very people to whom the 'oracles of God' were given, yet they were much more blind than the Gentiles who did not have them and were without any knowledge or instruction whatsoever. This is the terrible thing that is being taught here! And I think this is a word to modern evangelical people. God forbid, my friends, that when God chooses to revive his work again evangelicals should be the people who should be by-passed because they are living on a tradition rather than on a living experience of God; because they have become proud of their knowledge of the Scriptures but have lost the Spirit; because they have enjoyed a kind of affluence, material as well as spiritual.

This is an appalling thought! Is the decline, the declension in this country today not due largely to these things? Our very affluence may be the greatest curse. The danger with an affluent society always is to be content and to slacken, and the poorer nations are working hard. While we become slack they are putting energy into it and so our very blessing becomes a curse to us. I think this has been seen since the last war. The recovery of Germany has been a phenomenon, an amazing phenomenon. She is one of the leading industrial nations. Why? Well, because she was so down that she had to work, whereas the other nations, the more prosperous nations, tend to rest upon their oars. That is the principle that is involved here. And it can happen to a church, it can happen to a Christian individual; and it can apply, I say, not only to material benefits and blessings and affluence, it can even apply to an understanding of the Word and the possession of the truth. The moment we begin to rest upon it and to take pride in it and to think that 'we are the people', we have fallen into this very error that brought down this terrible calamity upon the children of Israel.

Now it is important that we should grasp this because our Lord himself said this very thing in his teaching. It is seen in the Parable of the Vineyard in Matthew 21:42 and in the judgment announced in Matthew 23:24. Stephen did the same when he stood before the Sanhedrin. He took them through their whole history and said: 'Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always

resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it' [Acts 7:51]. And that is the very thing that the Apostle is saying here. This had been the tendency of this people from the very beginning, but now the final calamity has come upon them. All that had been predicted and prophesied has come to a head. They were but suggestions of what was coming. It has now come.

And so, you see, this statement helps us to understand the whole of the teaching of the Old Testament. The whole of the Old Testament is, in a sense, a prophecy of this climactic point when the Son of God came and the chosen people did not recognize Him but crucified Him, preferring Barabbas to Him. So, the judgment of God comes down upon them. And the terrifying thing about that is that it all happened to them because they were the people of God, because they did have the promises when nobody else had them, because they alone had the 'oracles', the Word of God, and all the ceremonial and the temple and all that it taught and suggested. These very blessings that God had given to them were the things that had blinded them to the truth as it is in Christ Jesus.

What are the lessons taught here? I suggest there are four of them. First: the great lesson about the wrong way of seeking God's blessing; secondly: judicial blindness; thirdly and fourthly, how to understand the Imprecatory and the Messianic psalms respectively.

First of all: Why is it true to say that 'Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for?' The whole answer is because they were not seeking it in the right way. It is because of their complete misunderstanding of the law and the Prophets and especially of the Messiah in His character and His work when He did come. The Apostle has really said this at the end of chapter 9 where we read: 'What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingblock: As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and a rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed'. Their whole tragedy was due to the fact that they did not seek the thing they were seeking in the right way. What they were seeking was right; but here is the terrible lesson, you can be seeking the right thing and yet miss it entirely because you are not seeking it in the right way.

Are we all clear about this? This is where the danger of religion comes in. There are very genuine people who say, 'I want to know God, I want to be blessed of God' — but they do not know Him, and if they remain as they are they never will.

But they are zealous, they are keen, they read their Bibles, they pray, they do good works, they will do almost anything, some of them make great sacrifices; but they do not know Him!

Now let us not forget what the Apostle has said about these people. 'Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. I bear them record that they have a zeal for God'. They did have it. They really were seeking intensely, persistently, energetically. The Pharisee was not a man who merely said 'I fast twice in the week and give a tenth of my goods to the poor'. He did it. It was true. That was the whole tragedy of these people. It is the tragedy of all people who trust to their own religion, or their own seeking of God, or their own good works. There is only one way in which this blessing can be obtained. It is entirely by faith. The tragedy of Israel is that she did not seek it 'by faith'. She thought she could keep the law; she felt that she could obtain righteousness and get the blessing of God by the possession of the temple and attendance there and the possession of the law and her works. That is why Stephen had to say to them, Do not tell me, 'We have got the Temple'; God does not dwell in temples made with hands. They thought every time they went into the temple that they were getting a blessing. They did not realize that you could have a heart of stone even in the temple, and the moment you look at the temple in this wrong way. And people are still doing it in their religious life, in their great cathedrals which they think is the worship of God. 'This mountain', as the woman of Samaria said, which was Gerizim; the Jews said 'No, in Jerusalem'. Our Lord says, Neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem. The time cometh, and now is, when the Father shall seek the true worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

If you are relying upon the fact that you have a Bible or that you are a church member or that you go to a particular building or that you are doing certain good works, you are like the Jews. You are outside, you are blind and you have not got it, and you will never get it along that line. There is only one way of salvation — this is the message of the whole Bible — it is Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It is simple faith in Him, nothing else. If you bring anything else in you have not got it, you will never obtain it. You may get great personal satisfaction, as the Jews had, but the test is this: How do you react to the preaching of justification by faith only? Are you annoyed or irritated by it? Do you feel it is unfair to you? If so, you are like the Jews. That is the tragedy of this people.

I believe we are witnessing something like this at the present time. It is a terrible thing to say, but is it not true that the greatest hindrance to true knowledge of God in Christ and salvation in this country today is the so-called Christian church? It is the greatest hindrance to the people because she is representing a false Christianity. Those who still believe in justification by faith are a very small remnant. Thank God there are still 'seven thousand who have not bowed the knee'. But we are a remnant and there is no question but that the official church, 'Christendom', as it is called, is today the greatest hindrance to the true faith not

only in this country but in the whole world. It is a terrifying thing, but it has been true in the past and I believe it is true today.

But let us also be careful if we believe that we belong to the remnant not to boast. We all need to examine ourselves and to be careful. There is only one safe position and it is when we can say honestly, 'I am nothing. Thou art all'. Here is this terrible lesson of this nation of Israel. She has not obtained it. Why? Well, 'because she had a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge'. And the knowledge is, Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. May God have mercy upon us all and give us understanding in these great mysterious matters.

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