

John Piper: Does God Soften Hearts He Hardened?

[Romans 1:18–32](#) is striking. There the apostle Paul casts the fallout of idolatry into categories of sexual sin — of a deepening entrapment to sexual sin, and specifically homosexual practices. The immediate relevance and potency of this text for our own culture raises all sorts of controversy. Merely expounding the Bible’s own words in this chapter is an act commonly judged as scandalous hate speech. But the Bible says it. We won’t ignore it. Christians cannot ignore it. So then can these idolaters be saved from a process of divine heart-hardening? The question arrives from a listener named Nate.

“Hello, Pastor John! I was recently reading [Romans 1:18–32](#). There Paul seems to be saying that God gave up homosexual sinners to dishonorable passions because they worshiped the creature rather than the Creator. There’s a judgment in this text, the judgment of God giving them over to a further hardening. Yet it also seems to me that former practitioners of homosexual sin can be saved out of that lifestyle (as we see in [1 Corinthians 6:9–11](#)). So the handing over does not seem to be a permanent, irreversible thing either. So is it possible for the ever-hardening heart of Romans 1 to eventually be saved?”

Ever-Hardening?

Well, if Nate uses the phrase *ever-hardening heart*, then he’s already answering the question, because if they are saved, then the hardening wasn’t *ever-hardening*. But I assume what he’s asking is whether the people of Romans 1, whom God gave up to the lust of their hearts, can be saved.

“The people of Romans 1 can be saved if God sends them the gospel and opens their hearts to believe it.”

In other words, is the giving up to hardness, to lust in this case, always forever? Can God give up to hardness and corruption for a season — or not? My answer is yes, he can. He can and he does, and so the people of Romans 1 can be saved if God sends them the gospel and opens their hearts to believe it. Here are several reasons that I think that.

All Condemned

The main one is the flow of thought in Romans 1–3 itself. We don’t have to run over to 1 Corinthians 6, which we will, but we don’t have to. The main point in that flow of thought, Paul’s intention in Romans 1–3, is to teach that these folks in Romans 1 can be saved. Chapter 1 describes the typical Gentile situation before God in the bondage and blindness in sin. Chapter 2 describes the Jewish situation of bondage and blindness in sin. Then chapter 3 introduces God’s saving action to rescue people from both groups, Jew and Gentile.

[Romans 3:9](#) summarizes what he's been saying for two chapters. He says, "What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin." That phrase *both Jews and Greeks* refers to chapter 1 and chapter 2. I think that phrase *under sin* refers to bondage under the power of sin for both Jew and Gentile as they were described in chapter 1 and chapter 2.

Changed Hearts

Then comes this glorious saving action in [Romans 3:21–24](#): "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

"God steps into the seemingly impossible bondage to sin that he himself has handed people over to, and sovereignly changes their hearts."

Those words *all have sinned and fall short* — or literally, *lack the glory of God* — I think, are intentionally designed to recall [Romans 1:23](#): "[they] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

Those are the people that God gives up to dishonorable passions because they exchanged the glory of God. They lack the glory of God. These are the very ones who threw away God's glory, and he handed them over to corruption. But these are the ones in [Romans 3:23](#) who are justified by faith. That's the connection Paul is making.

That's my first reason for saying that the condition of the Gentiles in chapter 1 — of being handed over to the lust of their flesh — is not necessarily irrevocable. I think chapter 3 of Romans is intended to say that God saves all who believe, including some of them from chapter 1.

Such Were Some of You

Here's the second reason I think we should be hopeful for folks like those in chapter 1 of Romans. That same flow of thought seen in Romans 1–3 is found in [1 Corinthians 6:9–10](#). It says, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" So, there they are, set on a trajectory. They are doomed. He goes on: "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." That corresponds to the Gentile situation of Romans 1.

Now, verse 11: "And such were some of you" — you believers, you saints, you people on the way to heaven. "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" ([1 Corinthians 6:9–11](#)). That

last phrase corresponds to the salvation in Romans 3–8. So we’re encouraged to believe that God steps into the seeming impossible bondage to sin that he himself has handed people over to, and sovereignly changes their hearts and saves them.

God of Mercy

Here’s the third reason I think the sinners in Romans 1, those God has given up to bondage to sin, can be saved and should take heart. God is free to save anyone he pleases, and none can thwart his purpose to do so. Here is [Romans 9:15](#): “For [God] says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion [or any bondage they’re in], but on God, who has mercy” ([Romans 9:15–16](#)).

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So, he has mercy on whom he wills, and he hardens whom he wills. In other words, if God has given people over to the hardness of their heart, he is free to step in at any time he pleases with anyone he pleases to free them from that hardness.

A Sovereign Work

Here’s the fourth reason we should be hopeful for those who seem to be impossibly ensnared in sin. He raises the spiritually dead ([Ephesians 2:5](#)). He gives new birth ([John 3:8](#)). He takes out the heart of stone and puts in the heart of flesh ([Ezekiel 11:19](#)). We should be encouraged that God can take out any hard heart that he has handed people over to. In other words, salvation isn’t a mingling of human resolve and God’s resolve. It is a powerful sovereign work of God replacing hearts.

Finally, we should take heart for those folks in Romans 1 because even though Satan is stronger than we are, nevertheless, God overcomes satanic blindness to save people, according to [2 Corinthians 4:4–6](#). If he’s willing and able to step in and conquer Satan’s supernatural power of blindness, who loves to beat up on people who have been handed over by God to their sin, we can be encouraged that he is able and willing to save those who are in bondage to their own finite sinfulness.

[John Piper \(@JohnPiper\)](#) is founder and teacher of [desiringGod.org](#) and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of [more than 50 books](#), including [Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist](#) and most recently [Why I Love the Apostle Paul: 30 Reasons](#).