

God Hardens Pharaoh's Heart

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Exodus: Redeemer and Redeemed / Exodus 4-14

Discussion Questions

1. Based on what Scripture teaches, how do you reconcile the tension of God's sovereignty in hardening hearts with human responsibility for one's actions?
2. Reflect on your own life and spiritual journey. Are there areas or instances where you feel your heart might be hardened towards God or His commands? What steps can you take to soften your heart (Heb 3:13)?
3. How does understanding the cultural context of words like "heart" and "hardened" in the Bible change your interpretation of scriptural narratives? How important is it to consider these cultural differences in your study of the Bible?
4. Hebrews 3:13 advises believers to exhort one another daily to prevent being hardened by sin's deceitfulness. What practical steps can you take to follow this admonition? Think about friendships, family, and church life. How can you support each other in maintaining soft hearts toward God and His commands?
5. How does the sermon's exploration of God's sovereignty and human will challenge or affirm your views on predestination and free will? Discuss how these theological concepts impact your daily faith practice.

Sermon Notes

I've got two things I want us to see today

1. Our hearts should be humbled by the fact that God softened our hearts.
2. Our hearts struggle with humility because we underestimate sin and misunderstand grace.

Our hearts should be humbled by the fact that God softened our hearts.

Throughout the drama of Exodus, we have seen the relationship between God's self-revelation and Pharaoh's heart disposition. In fact, this language of hardening is particularly concentrated here and does not occur anywhere else in Scripture at this frequency—around 20x in this specific chapter section.

Let me just say this as well: we can never grow in our love, appreciation, and humility in the face of God's glory without occasionally putting on our scuba gear and diving deep into the pool of mystery.

Concepts Translated

What do the Hebrews understand the heart to be?

For the Hebrews, the *heart* is a way of talking about the life of the inner man. But Freud has rather confused this idea for us. When the Hebrews talk about the *heart*, they are not referring to something like Freud's *id*—which is only a part of an individual's personality.

The לֵב (*lev*) was who you really were—which is why Jesus says that out of the mouth the *heart* speaks. We all say what we mean—even repressed speech is an attempt to get what we want. So, the לֵב is often found in Scriptures related to our inner thoughts, motivations, and union with God.

What do the Hebrews understand by hardening?

[Exodus 4:14](#) uses three different verbs to express very similar ideas: 1) strength to act (or in this context to not act—so obstinate); 2) intensity of attitude; and 3) stubbornness.

So here we can get to see a sketch of how the inner life of Pharaoh is becoming obstinate, increasingly in negative attitude, and stubborn.

From the beginning, God makes a divine announcement before the court dramas between Aaron & the magicians and Moses & Pharaoh unfold where he tells the entire plan to Moses:

Exodus 4:21–23 *ESV*

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’ ”

So, to say that God is the *ultimate* cause of Pharaoh's hard heart does not change the secondary causes of Pharaoh's heart hardening.

Calvinsim & Arminianism

So, the Bible does say that God is the ultimate cause of Pharaoh's sin, but Pharaoh is also responsible for his own pride and rebellion.

[Exodus 4:21](#) is the umbrella text of the whole passage:

Exodus 4:21 ESV

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

But after we receive God’s commentary of what he will know and cause, we see how the actions of individuals unfold. Why does God give Moses this commentary? We can presume it is so that Moses does not lose heart that he is to go repeatedly into Pharaoh’s court—people’s response to the gospel is not our responsibility. We are to be faithful to go and tell.

Pharaoh does harden his heart against the Lord

Under this umbrella of God’s ultimate cause, we have many different occasions where Pharaoh is the agent who hardens his heart in the face of God’s revelation.

Exodus 8:15 ESV

¹⁵ But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

Exodus 8:32 ESV

³² But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.

Exodus 9:34 ESV

³⁴ But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants.

How does he do this?

- He goes back on his words after God relents.
- He rejects his magicians’ testimony that this is the word of God.

Elsewhere in Scripture, people are encouraged to refrain from hardening their hearts.

Psalms 95:8 ESV

⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

Proverbs 28:14 ESV

¹⁴ Blessed is the one who fears the LORD always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.

So there is a relationship between the secondary cause and the ultimate cause. Did Pharaoh act to harden his own heart? *Yes*. Did the Lord harden Pharaoh’s heart? *Yes*.

Why does Paul refer to this exchange?

Part of the reasons that Pharaoh's heart is an enduring conversation is Paul's use of the concepts in [Exodus 4-14](#) to answer an objection, and *that really, really matters for us*.

One of the principles—one of the best ways to understand obscure or complicated concepts is to zoom out and survey how other biblical authors give the inspired interpretation of a text. When Paul writes in [Romans 9:17-18](#), we're getting a Holy Spirit inspired commentary on what [Exodus 4-14](#) is talking about. I'll remind you of what he wrote.

Romans 9:17–18 *ESV*

¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Romans 9:17 *ESV*

¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

We don't want to fall into either the error of saying that God is powerless pertaining to evil or saying he causes evil. Both are blasphemous.

1. God never wills sin to be done, but he may will to not stop sin from occurring. Think about [Psalm 81:12](#) "12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels."
2. God wisely directs sin both by putting boundaries and trajectories on its effect or intensity or duration.
3. God directs all evil unto good. He does this positively through saving evildoers or crushing them. In all things, he is maximizing his glory and bring about the good for his own. Think about how the life of Joseph is an example of this. Think about how the greatest injustice was also the greatest good.

He permits Pharaoh to persist in his hardness by willing to not give him a new heart—he lets Pharaoh exist in his natural state without intervention.

Now let's come up for some air.

God's patience with Pharaoh was so that he could demonstrate his mercy to Israel. Totally unmerited. Totally one sided.

So to summarize:

1. God is the ultimate cause of Pharaoh's heart.
2. God does not do this because of condition of what he knows Pharaoh will do, but

Our hearts struggle with humility because we underestimate sin and misunderstand grace.

Underestimate Sin

If we come to [Exodus 4:21](#) or [Exodus 9:16](#) and protest, “That is not fair!”, can I suggest to you that we might not take sin seriously enough?

Pharaoh did not deserve better than he got.

When we think about our wills—that is, our power to act, we are free to act however our heart wants us to act. You cannot do something beyond what you want to do.

For Pharaoh, he wanted to be glorified and unrivaled in Egypt, so all of his decisions filtered through that lens. He could not do something beyond what he wanted.

Paul has a congruent idea in play as he moved through Romans. In [Romans 1](#), we see that people act, choosing to suppress knowledge in the face of irrefutable evidence and this leads to a “handing over”—and in [Romans 2-3](#) we see that this condition affects all people.

And so, because we do what we want, all people who have hard hearts are enslaved to their heart’s lust for sin. They are free in the sense that they do what they want.

So, to be clear *hardness* is our natural state. Apart from God’s intervention, you and I’s own hearts are ultimately hard towards him. Even a decade ago it was more difficult for people to cede this point, but now as the Christian foundations of Western civilization, I do not need to convince people. Their TVs, podcasts, streams show how hard our neighbors hearts are.

But doesn’t Pharaoh live the [Romans 1](#) life? Is not Pharaoh like the [Romans 1](#) person who sees the very finger of God and trades the created thing for the creator?

Apart from Christ’s work to give us—what? *New hearts*. This is why Paul must eventually bring up Pharaoh you see—because not everyone gets a new heart. Why us? Why indeed. That, brothers and sisters, is the whole point. There is no reason apart from pure unadulterated grace. Full stop.

Misunderstand Grace

Paul anticipated the objection of his own audience as to why God gives new hearts to some but not others and wrote in [Romans 9:19-23](#)

Romans 9:19–23 *ESV*

¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out

of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—

Was not the purpose of Pharaoh's crushing:

1. The demonstration of God's judgement against his oppressive acts?
2. The display of his mercy to his people?

Jesus's heart is for those who are hard hearted

Was it not God Himself who says through Ezekiel to us today, [Ezekiel 36:26](#)?

Ezekiel 36:26 ESV

²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

So who can boast? Is your heart soft today? It is because God intervened in you and gave you a new heart so that you can love and live as you were created to do.

Am I like Pharaoh? Or, how do I have a soft, humble heart?

How do I know if I have a hard heart like Pharaoh's?

Pastor John Piper points out two signs of a hard heart:

1. Is your heart hard to the sufferings, sorrows, or pain of your brothers and sisters in Christ? In [Mark 3](#) Jesus asked if it was right to save a life on the Sabbath and for wanting to be so right they kept quiet. [Mark 3:5](#) tells us Jesus was "grieved at their hardness of heart."
2. Is your heart unwilling to hear the Word and repent? Do you hear the preached Word and say in your heart—"I hope they are listening? They really need to hear this?" Or do you break, longing for God to restore you.

When you have the heart of flesh Ezekiel prophesied about, how do you guard it from hardening?

Hebrews 3:13 ESV

¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

One of the dangers of neglecting the gathering of the saints is you are vulnerable being hardened by the subtle and soft suggestions that sin isn't as serious as our pastor says.

In community, we are always looking out for one another,

- being sure that we do not miss the finger of God,
- that we do not harden our hearts to the needs of those around us,
- being sure that we remind people of Christ's movement towards us,
- soberly seeing sin for how deadly it is,
- and never boasting in God's grace but marveling that he would take us, the needy company of people and make us whole and give this family.

If you looked at my heart, you'd say, why does he deserve it? I don't. And that's the point. I'm humbled by it, and you should be too.

Bibliography

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Beale, G.K. "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in [Exodus 4-14](#) and [Romans 9](#), *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984): 129-154. [Special note: This resource is a highly cited on the topic.]

For a historiography and survey on the perspectives of the Reformers and Post-Reformation scholastics, see Muller, Richard A. *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* (Baker, 2017).