

# How Should We Think About the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus?

## SUMMARY/OVERVIEW

As readers trek through the book of Exodus, one of the issues that causes many to scratch their heads is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

We read about this hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 7:1-5. In this passage, God tells Moses, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (v. 3). Despite the signs that God performs in Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to the message that Moses and his brother, Aaron, bring. God will nevertheless deliver His people from slavery, with this stated result: "And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it" (v. 5).

Pharaoh's hard-heartedness then remains a theme throughout this section of Exodus. There are times when Pharaoh's heart is simply described as "hard" or "unyielding" (Exodus 7:14, 22; 8:19; 9:7). There are times when Exodus records that *Pharaoh* hardened his heart (Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34) And there are times when we're told that *the LORD* hardens Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10).

How should we think about this hardening of Pharaoh's heart?

## WHAT WE'VE GOT TO SAY OUT OF THE GATE

In this story, we see God sovereignly working to accomplish His purposes. Right out of the gate, we have to admit this is a difficult topic that touches both on God's sovereignty (in the LORD hardening Pharaoh's heart, cf. Romans 9:16-21) and human responsibility (in the passages talking about Pharaoh hardening his heart). We're not going to solve this mystery in one front-and-back page. We shouldn't let this keep us from pressing in and learning what we can from this section of the Bible, however.

## SO WHAT CAN WE SAY, AND HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT THIS?

Knee-jerk reactions come to the surface for many as they read this section of the Bible. We begin asking questions like "Why would God do this?" and saying "But that doesn't seem fair!" Rather than immediately putting God on the hot seat in this story, however, it's important for us to keep at least three "big picture" things in mind as we think about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. While these things may not answer EVERY question we have, they at least help us frame our approach in a right way and keep us moving into the message of Scripture.

**First, let's remember what we know about God.** Already from the books of Genesis and Exodus, we know that God is sovereign, He's good, and He's just. He's the sort of God who speaks all of creation into existence; He makes a "very good" creation and initiates a relationship with humanity (Genesis 1-2). He's the sort of God who pursues that relationship

even after humanity rebels and sins (Genesis 12:1-3). He's the sort of God who hears the cry of His people and responds (Exodus 3:7-8). As we think about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, we need to keep this fuller picture of who God is in mind.

**Second, let's remember what we know about our hearts.** As we read through Exodus 7-12, it's not like God is taking Pharaoh's innocent heart and darkening it in a way that Pharaoh was resistant to. Already from the book of Exodus we've learned that Pharaoh is enslaving the Israelites (Exodus 1:8-14) and commands that Hebrew infant boys be killed (Exodus 1:15-16). So in hardening Pharaoh's heart, it's important to point out that God isn't re-directing Pharaoh, against Pharaoh's will. (Remember - these passages we just looked at show that Pharaoh's heart was already bent away from God!) One approach to this section of Scripture says this: Knowing the evil and resistance already present in Pharaoh's heart, God justly and sovereignly hardens Pharaoh's heart, and uses this as part of His larger plan to accomplish His good purposes.

If we take a step even further back, we know from the earliest pages of Genesis that our hearts as humans are turned away from God, because of our sin. In our sinful nature we have chosen to reject God and rebel against His good lordship. To read a lot more about the state of our hearts apart from Jesus, check out Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:21-23; Romans 3:10-18. As we think about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, we need to keep this fuller picture of the natural state of our hearts (including Pharaoh's heart in particular) in mind.

**Third, let's remember that we're not Pharaoh.** Whatever the exact situation with Pharaoh in Exodus, and however it worked itself out in real time exactly, that doesn't change the fact that everyone reading this right now is invited to respond to the saving work of God.

We're not just invited to respond to the saving work that God accomplished in delivering the Israelites from slavery to Egypt (though that was huge); we're invited to respond to the saving work God accomplished in delivering His people from slavery to sin through what Jesus has done for us on the cross (this is way better, and that's still putting it too mildly). This salvation replaces our own sin-polluted hearts with hearts that are new, hearts transformed to now respond to God and engage in a right relationship with Him. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul says it this way: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

#### Source Consulted

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