

Pharaoh's Hard Heart

There are few Scriptural discussions with more doctrinal overtones than the discussion of what God does to Pharaoh's heart in Exodus. The text does, after all, say several times, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." It's this way in every translation of the Bible I've ever seen.

That's the evidence. Calvinists, though, like to turn the evidence into Exhibit A for Calvinism. In conjunction with the discussion of Pharaoh in Romans 9, which is grist for a whole sermon by itself, they use the Exodus text to argue that Pharaoh was not a free moral agent. They insist that instead, He was God's puppet, that every time he said no to Moses, every time he went back on his word, God was the One who was pulling the strings. Pharaoh had no choice in the matter.

They similarly argue that none of us have any choice in the matter either. Instead, they say that before the foundation of the world, God decided whether each one of us was going to be saved or damned and now is pulling our puppet strings accordingly. That's a strong conclusion, but does Pharaoh's fate really support it? Let's examine the question this evening as we study Pharaoh's hard heart.

The Scriptural Evidence

The first thing that we must do in this study is to consider all the evidence. It's not like there's one passage in Exodus that mentions Pharaoh's heart. Instead, by my count, there are 19, and not all those passages say the same thing. This evening, for the sake of time and because they aren't analytically useful, I'm going to throw out the texts where God says, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." That leaves us with 16 others. Let's go through and read them all together: Exodus 7:13, 7:14, 7:22, 7:23, 8:15, 8:19, 8:32, 9:7, 9:12, 9:34, 9:35, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, and 14:8.

In all of this, I see three main variations of the phrase. The first category is when the text says some variation of "Pharaoh's heart was hard." The first appearance of this formula is in 7:13. The last is in 9:35.

The second category is "Pharaoh hardened his heart." It first appears in 8:15 and last appears in 9:34.

Our final category is the infamous "God hardened Pharaoh's heart," and its variants. We first find this formulation in 9:12 and last find it in 14:8.

Do you see the pattern, friends? These phrases aren't intermingled equally throughout the text. Instead, they're very clearly bunched. In the early part of the story of the Exodus, it's all "Pharaoh's heart was hard" and "Pharaoh hardened his heart." God isn't said to be actively doing anything. It's all Pharaoh. Then, in Exodus 9, we have a brief transition period. After that, though, from Exodus 10 on, it's all "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." Only God is said to be actively doing something.

God and His Enemies

This pattern is something that we commonly see in God's dealings with His enemies. Look, for instance, at 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. It's not clear what the timing of this event is, but it is clear what Paul is predicting. There are going to be some people who choose not to love the truth and so be saved. Because they refuse to believe the truth, God is going to send a strong delusion on them to make certain that they're going to be condemned. Once they have decided that they are opposed to God, God is going to work against them rather than for them.

Perhaps the best Biblical example of this is the story of King Ahab in 1 Kings 22. Ahab by this point is a determined enemy of God, so God allows a lying spirit to enter into Ahab's false prophets so that Ahab will be enticed to his own doom. Notice that the choice still remains with Ahab. God even sends Micaiah, a genuine prophet, to tell him the truth. However, God knows how Ahab is going to react to the lying prophets, so Ahab's fate is sealed by God's decision.

Pharaoh's Downfall

I think basically the same thing is going on with Pharaoh's downfall. Through the first half of the Exodus story, Pharaoh, like Ahab, proves that he is a determined enemy of God. After he does so, God decides that He might as well use Pharaoh for an object lesson. He hardens his heart so that he will be destroyed.

Note that even this doesn't require God jerking Pharaoh's puppet strings. Every one of us, right now, knows exactly how to harden the hearts of our friends and family members. Let me give you an example. Shawn and I are dear friends, but I guarantee you with 100 percent certainty that if I walk into his office and start calling him the n-word, I will harden his heart against me. I don't have to take away Shawn's free will to do that. I just have to know him.

If I understand that about Shawn, if I know exactly how to provoke him and make him angry, how much more would God know exactly how to provoke and anger Pharaoh? There's nothing in this text that speaks to God taking away Pharaoh's free will, just like God never took away Ahab's free will. Instead, it reveals how God will manipulate and ruin those who set themselves up against Him as His enemies.

In fact, the story of the second half of the 10 Plagues is the story of Pharaoh's ruin. At the beginning of the story, Pharaoh is the king of the greatest nation on earth. By the end of the story, he has nothing. In Exodus 10, he loses the respect of his people. They recognize that he is destroying them because of his stubbornness. In Exodus 12, he loses his pride. God could have killed him long before, but instead, God uses the plagues to make Pharaoh crawl, to force him to let the Israelites go. In Exodus 14, he loses his army and his life as he and his men drown together in the Red Sea.

This is the point that God wants to make: that next to Him, even the king of the greatest nation on earth is nothing. If such a king chooses to fight against God, disaster will be the result. Once Pharaoh has rejected God, God hardens his heart further to make sure that his disaster will be final and complete. At the beginning of the story, Pharaoh asks, "Who is the Lord?" By the end of the story, there can be no doubt.

Our Application

From all of this, there are three applications that we ought to draw. The first is that God will be glorified in us. Either we will glorify Him as His obedient servants, or we will glorify Him as His defeated enemies. There is no third option. God showed who He was as He demolished Pharaoh. If we are defiant like Pharaoh was, God will show who He is as He demolishes us.

Second, this story should teach us that God's patience is limited. He is longsuffering, yes. He is merciful, yes. However, He is not going to put up with our nonsense forever.

The sad truth is that some people aren't going to listen to the gospel, no matter how well and convincingly it is presented. In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees could watch Him cast out demons and accuse Him of doing so by the power of the prince of demons. Like Pharaoh, they hardened their hearts so much that they were impervious to the truth.

We can be in the same boat today. We can be so dishonest with the Scriptures that God sees that nothing possibly can get through to us. At that point, rather than working for us, God is going to start working against us. He is going to bring us low and condemn us to eternal punishment because we have refused to reveal His authority in any other way.

Pharaoh is currently serving as an eternal reminder that rebellion against God is foolish. If we choose to walk the path that Pharaoh walked, we will end up right next to him in the fires of hell, proving the same point. To turn Romans 8:31 around, if God is against us, who can be for us?

Finally, we should learn not to disrespect God. I can look at the sad story of Pharaoh and spot the point of no return. After Exodus 9, Pharaoh is a dead man walking. However, I don't know the mind of God. I don't know where the point of no return is for me. I don't know where it is for you.

However, I believe that it is there. If we continue to treat God like dirt, if we refuse to listen to Him, if we continue to throw all of His blessings and mercies back in His face, sooner or later, He will give up on us. He will stop trying to win us over because He knows it's not possible.

Once we reach that point with God, we're dead men walking too. That's not what God wants for us. It wasn't even what He wanted for Pharaoh. However, if we drive Him to it, He will do it.

Friends, we do not know when we are about to run out of rope. If we do, we will pay for it with our souls. The only wise alternative is to repent, and to repent immediately.

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