

## “The ‘Hardest’ Exodus Sermon”

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take your Bibles and let's meet in Exodus 11...

While you're turning there, let me read you the introduction from a book I read this past week. The author begins like this:

“When climbing from lowlands to mountaintops, one must often pass through clouds. That's the way it has been for me all my life as I have tried to get the best views of the glory of God.

When you enter a layer of clouds, it helps to have a guide to keep you away from the precipices and on the path to the other side of the murkiness. That's one way to view this book. I hope it will serve as a guide upward through the haze and confusion...

I admit that some of the paths in this book are steep. And some of the steepest places are through the thickest clouds. The climb is not for everyone. We all have different gifts, and not everyone is called to this kind of intellectual climb. I don't mean that the non-climbers will see less glory or worship with less passion. There are glories in the valleys. And there are paths into beauties of God that are less intellectual. I would not dare to claim that those who do this sort of climbing always see or savor more glory than those with wider eyes for the glory that is right there in the meadow.

Nevertheless, some of us are wired to make this climb. There is not much choice in it. We should no more boast about doing it than one should boast about being a morning person. Almost every time we open our Bibles, we see challenges. Puzzles. Mysteries. Paradoxes. Mountain paths beckon us, but seem to lead in opposite directions. We move toward these paths like bumblebees toward morning glories.”<sup>1</sup>

I love that introduction. The author is basically telling you that you're probably not going to like his book. He's saying, “Some of you are really going to like the next couple hundred pages and some of you...not so much.” And that's okay. You can probably guess that I was one of those who enjoyed the book because I have a curious mind. I like exploring mysteries and puzzles. But some do not. That's just not how they are wired. And, again, that's okay.

In some ways preaching is similar. There are some sermons I preach where people in the congregation come up to me after with glowing affection telling me that it was the best sermon I've ever preached. That same week I've received word that someone is leaving a church I've pastored because I'm the worst preacher they've ever heard and that week's sermon confirms it. True story. We laugh, but every pastor has those stories. Why? Because what some of you like in a sermon and Bible study is not what others of you like at all. You have different tastes. You're drawn to different subjects. We all tend to assume that everyone's interests are the same as ours, but trust me, they're not. You all are more different than you realize. This makes preaching an impossible task. Impossible, that is, if the goal is to please everyone in the crowd.

But that's really not the goal is it? No the goal is to faithfully communicate what God is saying in His Word. That's what God has called me to. That's what you need, whether you realize it or not. And that doesn't always coincide with our tastes and preferences. But every so often we come to a subject where I just know going into it that the topic is going to be more interesting to a small group than it is to the vast

majority. This is one of those weeks. For those few of you who have been bringing this up in conversation since we started this Exodus journey, you're welcome. For the rest of you...well...my apologies. Thanks for your patience. Rest assured, every week won't be like this one. You're probably really going to like the sermon next week (maybe). In the meantime...try to stay awake. How's that for a set up?

Today we will take a whack at a subject that has garnered a lot of interesting discussion over the centuries and one that I've touched on in the past but have yet to dedicated an entire sermon to exploring. That subject is a question—What are we to make of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus? Embedded in that one question are a number of other questions in disguise, some of which we will investigate today.<sup>2</sup> Some we will get to next week. And some you'll have to get to in your own time.

We considered Exodus 11 last week, which serves as a mini introduction to the tenth and final plague. You'll notice though that the section ends on a familiar note. Have a look at verses 9 and 10...

*“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.’<sup>10</sup> Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.”* (Exodus 11:9-10)

There is nothing new here. This is the sort of pattern we have come to expect in the Exodus story. The Lord tells Moses to go make demands of Pharaoh while at the same time informing the prophet that Pharaoh will pay him no mind. Moses obeys and Pharaoh resists as predicted. That resistance is depicted as a hardening of heart.

The only significant variance from scene to scene is in how that hardening is described. In several instances, as here, the Lord is presented as the agent who causes the hardening, so we read something like, “*the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart*” (4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). In a few cases the text reads “*Pharaoh hardened his heart*” or something to that effect (8:15, 32; 9:34), which suggests that Pharaoh acted upon his own heart. And then there are places where we find statements like “*Pharaoh's heart was hardened,*” which are ambiguous because they conceal the agent who does the hardening (7:13-14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35). Is there a pattern? Not that I can discern with confidence.<sup>3</sup> Some attempts have been made to discern a pattern, but none that have proven satisfactory to most scholars.

Before we venture any further, we should pause for a moment and make sure we understand what is meant by a “hardened” heart. Here's how I would define it: a hardened heart is one that is rendered unresponsive to God and His Word and therefore fit for judgment unless the condition of the heart is somehow changed. It's an unbelieving heart. A heart that rejects the things of God and refuses to obey His instructions. That was the condition of Pharaoh's heart throughout the Exodus story.

But who hardened Pharaoh's heart? That is a question that has baffled a great many people because of the variant language sprinkled throughout the narrative.

### **Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?**

So which is it? Did God harden Pharaoh's heart or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? The answer, it seems to me is...yes. In some sense, both statements are true. The more challenging question relates to the ultimate cause. Was Pharaoh's hardening activity owing to God's prior hardening of his heart *or* was God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart a response to Pharaoh's self-hardening? I should clarify, I'm referring to which one comes first (if either) in the snapshot of history we find in this narrative that stretches from Exodus 4 to 14. We are not given information about the condition of Pharaoh's heart prior to this time, so we would only be speculating. Please keep this in mind throughout what follows.

The answer I was first exposed to (and the one I held myself for some time) was that God acted on Pharaoh's heart only after Pharaoh hardened his own heart. In support of this, it's commonly stated that God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart doesn't occur until the sixth plague (9:12) and only after we read that Pharaoh hardened his own heart in response to prior plagues (8:15, 32). In light of this claim, people then argue that God's hardening of Pharaoh was an act of judgment. The man had stubbornly resisted God's will to the point that God finally sealed his fate by hardening his heart, which ensured that he would not repent at some later time and thus made God's judgment on the man inescapable.

If you hold this view, you are in good company. Many fine Christians have and still do. In fact, it's probably the most common explanation espoused in our setting. It's very mainstream. It's the view I once held. After a while, however, I began to question if things were really that simple, nice and neat. Upon closer investigation I realized there were several details in the text that I had missed, which made this position harder to maintain. Let me explain.

If it were true that God hardened Pharaoh only after he hardened himself, then we would expect to see no mention of the Lord hardening Pharaoh's heart prior to the verses that present Pharaoh as hardening his own heart.<sup>4</sup> The whole theory is predicated on the assumption that God only acts on Pharaoh's heart after Pharaoh hardens himself. So is that what we find? No. It's not. The very first reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart came all the way back in chapter 4,

*“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.’”* (Exodus 4:21)

So the hardening theme is first introduced with reference to God hardening Pharaoh and nothing is said of Pharaoh hardening himself first. The next reference we find follows the same pattern. It's found in chapter 7 and reads,

*“I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, <sup>4</sup>Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. <sup>5</sup>The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.”* (Exodus 7:3-5)

The next three references are ambiguous, simply asserting that Pharaoh's heart was in a hardened state (7:13, 14; 8:15). In other words, you're six references in before you find mention of Pharaoh hardening his own heart (8:19). So the idea that the divine hardening of Pharaoh is not introduced until halfway through the plagues is misleading.

Now some will push back and say, “Yes, but...those prior reference are speaking about what God will do to Pharaoh's heart *in the future* and, therefore, they don't really count because they could be referring to a divine hardening that occurs down the road, sometime after Pharaoh hardens himself.” Again, that's only half correct. It's true the first references to the Lord acting on Pharaoh are future referring, but that's by necessity because it occurs before Moses confronts Pharaoh. A closer examination, however, reveals that it cannot refer to God's activity in the sixth plague or later. Why? I love it when you ask questions that I was hoping to answer...

Take a closer look at the very first hardening reference, found in chapter 4...

*“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.’”* (Exodus 4:21)

God says He’s going to harden Pharaoh’s heart, but there is a very specific time referent for the fulfillment. He’s going to do it when Moses goes back to Egypt and tells Pharaoh to release God’s people. But notice that God tells Moses, *“see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power.”* What miracles is he referring to? In context of chapter 4, it is not the plagues. It’s the miracles that God just demonstrated before Moses, signs like the transformation of his staff to a snake.

So even though God gives Moses the power to do these miraculous works, he is then told that the Lord would harden Pharaoh’s heart so that the signs will not persuade him to listen (4:21). The question we should ask then is simple: When did those miraculous signs take place before Pharaoh? The answer is in chapter 7 *before* the plagues began. After reminding Moses again that He was going to harden Pharaoh’s heart (7:3), we find Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh...

*“Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, <sup>9</sup> ‘When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Prove yourselves by working a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.’” <sup>10</sup> So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. <sup>11</sup> Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. <sup>12</sup> For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs. <sup>13</sup> Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”* (Exodus 7:8-13)

So chapter 4 was pointing ahead to (at least) this moment in chapter 7. And chapter 4 suggests that the Lord would harden Pharaoh’s heart in that moment. This moment *before* the first plague. And, therefore, I would argue, when verse 13 says, *“Pharaoh’s heart was hardened,”* the source of the hardening is not as ambiguous as it appears out of context. On the basis of chapter 4, we can say that Pharaoh’s heart was hardened because the Lord had acted upon it.

Even the flow of the immediate context suggests as much. In the previous paragraph (and same scene), we find God saying, in verse 3, *“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart.”* So even if we didn’t have the benefit of chapter 4, the natural reading would be that the end of the scene (verse 13) was the fulfillment of the statement at the beginning (verse 3). If we were reading these chapters in succession for the very first time, the natural reading would be to assume God is the source of the hardening given how the story begins and what God said he would do. It wouldn’t even occur to you that Pharaoh may be acting on his own heart in any sense at least until 8:12, the very first time that is even suggested. So, to me, the common solution for working out his text doesn’t stand up well under scrutiny. It’s not that simple. The Lord doesn’t seem to wait for Pharaoh to harden his own heart. He seems to initiate the hardening from the start.

If you’re still not convinced, let me add another detail that I’ve neglected to mention thus far. When you examine all of the “hardening” passages you notice the repetition of a phrase that occurs with most of them. The phrase is *“...as the LORD had said.”* In fact, we just saw it in Exodus 7:13—*“Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”*

When we see that phrase we have to ask, “What did the Lord say?” When had God told Moses that Pharaoh’s heart would be hardened and that he would not listen to Moses? Twice. The first time was Exodus 4:21 before he arrived in Egypt and the second in 7:3 before the first plague. And in both of those references, the text is explicit in showing that the Lord is responsible for the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

So when one of the later verses says that Pharaoh's heart was hardened "*as the LORD had said*", we are meant to remember what God said, namely, that He Himself would harden Pharaoh's heart. Does that make sense?

So when we come to Exodus 8:15, the first instance where Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart, we have to keep this in mind. Listen to the verse.

*"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 8:15).

This suggests that even though Pharaoh is seen as acting on his own heart, it is not happening independently from the Lord's hardening activity. No, it happened "*as the LORD had said*." Even here then the Lord can still be seen as the primary cause. So if I were forced to make a choice, I would side with those saying that, at least within the window of Exodus 4 to 14, "Pharaoh became unrepentant because God predisposed him to be so."<sup>5</sup> Pharaoh hardened his heart in this snapshot of time because God hardened his heart (not the reverse).<sup>6</sup>

If we had time (and we don't) I could work one by one through each of these hardening passages and show you that, in light of these insights, they all support this conclusion. I'll include a footnote working through each of those verses, if you would like verification.<sup>7</sup> What you will find is that they all confirm in their own way that God is sovereign over Pharaoh and his heart. As Proverbs 21:1 says, "*The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*"

So in the end I agree with John Piper on this one. "Not once in Exodus 4-14 is the assertion of God's hardening of Pharaoh *grounded* in any attitude or act of Pharaoh. Instead, again and again the reason given or the hardening is God's *purpose* to demonstrate his power and magnify his name," as Paul explains in Romans 9 (which we will get to next week).<sup>8</sup>

But before we get to God's purposes in all this and the mystery of all this, let's raise a final question in our remaining time...

### **How Was Pharaoh's (or Anyone's) Heart Hardened?**

I don't pretend to know all the ins and outs of the mysterious workings of a human heart (or even my own heart). But as I look in Scripture I believe I can say with conviction that the way a heart hardens always involves revelation. There's more to it than revelation (like the condition of the heart that revelation comes in contact with, the effects of sin on the heart, and so on), but God's revelation plays a role.

When it comes to revelation (not the book, but revelation in the sense of what God reveals about Himself and His purposes), theologians sometimes distinguish between "natural" or "general" revelation and "supernatural" or "special" revelation.

Natural revelation is that which God reveals about Himself that everyone can access. For example, what we see in nature. We look in nature and we can discern something about God. We can deduce that God must exist. We may determine that He is wise and orderly. We can know that He is powerful. We may conclude that He is loving towards His creation by seeing how He provides for it. These are just some examples.

But while everyone can access this "natural" revelation on some level, everyone does not respond well to it. This is what Paul was addressing in Romans 1, where he writes this...

*“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” (Romans 1:18-23)*

So all people are without excuse before God and deserving of judgment. Why? Because they have suppressed the truth. God has revealed some measure of who He is through the things that He has made, but even that revelation has been rejected by humanity. In the face of God’s revelation, our hearts harden. In the language of Romans 1, our hearts “*darken*” and we become “*fools*” and we trade away the “*glory of the immortal God*” for trinkets and idols of our own making. That’s what happens when God’s revelation—in this case, His “*natural*” revelation—hits our sinful hearts.

“Special” revelation can have the same effect. This is revelation that comes through supernatural means—be it the miraculous or the inspired Word of God you hold in your hand. This is the kind of revelation that Pharaoh received. Remember the point of the plagues (as we saw last week) was to reveal something about God Himself. They show God to be the one true God, Judge, Savior, and Sovereign (among other things). But when that revelation comes in contact with Pharaoh’s sinful heart, what results is a hardening of his heart. That same revelation had a different effect on Moses and God’s people. But for Pharaoh it led to a hard heart.<sup>9</sup>

The same was true in Jesus’ day, which is why he explains to some of His opponents, it is “*because I tell the truth, you do not believe me*” (John 8:45). In other words, His speaking the truth actually triggered their unbelief. The same is true today.

In Sunday School, many of you will be reading the “Parable of the Sower,” one of Jesus’ most memorable parables. I’ll let you read and explore the parable in greater detail in your classes this morning. But what you will find is that the seed is scattered widely in the parable, but what happens to the seed depends on the soil that it falls upon and how that soil has been prepared. The seed is not the problem. The unprepared soil is the problem, in some instances.

Jesus explains that the seed stands for the Word—perhaps the Word of the Gospel—or we might say God’s revelation. The soil represents the condition of various human hearts. Some have been prepared to receive that revelation. Some have not. The condition of the soil determines what happens with the seed. But unfortunately the Word of God often falls on bad hearts and is, therefore, rejected.

But does that mean the Word has failed? Not necessarily. You’ll study that parable from Mark’s Gospel, so let’s consider it from Matthew’s. In Matthew’s Gospel we find that the parable and Jesus’ explanation of the parable are interrupted by a question concerning Jesus’ fondness for parables in His teaching ministry. This is what Matthew’s Gospel puts smack dab in the middle of the Parable of the Sower...

*“Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ <sup>11</sup> And he answered them, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup> For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. <sup>13</sup> This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “You will*

*indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. <sup>15</sup> For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them." <sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. <sup>17</sup> For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."* (Matthew 13:10-17)

So Jesus is teaching in parables and the disciples come and say, "Why can't you just say what you mean Jesus? What's with all these parables?" And Jesus responds by saying that His teaching was not intended for everyone. He says, "*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.*" Then He quotes from Isaiah 6. We studied that a few weeks back. That was the call of Isaiah. But at the end of Isaiah 6, which is what Jesus quotes, Isaiah is told that He will preach but no one will listen. In fact, the point seems to be that Isaiah's preaching will actually harden the hearts of the people and prepare them for God's judgment. That's the effect of Isaiah's preaching ministry. Probably not what he thought he was signing up for when he cried out "*Here I am! Send me*" (Isaiah 6:8).

So why does Jesus reference this and connect it to His own preaching ministry? Because His teaching, in this case His parables, have different effects on different people and in some cases that effect is the hardening of a heart. Michael Wilkins explains it like this: "God sovereignly uses the parables to harden a person's heart so that he or she will be unable to respond (v. 15), or to elicit the positive response of coming to Jesus, asking for an explanation, and accepting his message (v. 10)."<sup>10</sup>

Do you see? The revelation that Jesus offers in the parables is actually drawing a line of separation. It's showing to whom "*the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*" are intended and to whom they were not intended. How does the revelation show that? It is seen in the reaction to Christ's Word. Does it harden a heart and drive a person away *or* soften a heart and draw a person to Christ?

So when Jesus then pivots from that lesson to the explanation of the Parable of the Sower, it influences how we hear His explanation. Yes His Word (the seed) falls on hearts that reflect varying conditions and the condition of the heart (the soils) determines what happens next with the seed. But since every heart is sinful, there is no such thing as good soil if left to our own devices. For a sinful heart to be rendered good soil, someone has to prepare the soil? And who acts on the soil of a heart in this way? The biblical answer, it seems to me, is God. God is *not* to blame for the bad soil of sinful hearts. But if there is ever soil made good to receive His Word, God is absolutely to blame for that. So Jesus says, "*This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father*" (John 6:65).

So the condition of the heart is not random. It's not arbitrary. No. God has acted on some hearts by his grace (the good soil) to prepare them to receive the Word and understand it. Remember, "*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.*" The effect of the Word then is not random either. It does not fail. It hardens in unbelief or softens to faith. But it never returns void of its intention. As Jesus said in John 6:37 and 44, "*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out...No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...*"

So God acts upon our hearts through His revelation. Some seem to be hardened by it. Some are brought to faith by it (if God previously acts upon our hearts with His grace). Only God knows why the same seed produces different effects in different people. There is mystery here. But there is also intention. As Paul told the Romans, God "*has mercy on whomever He wills and he hardens whomever he wills.*" So revelation is like the sun. The same sun can melt wax or harden clay.

In the words of Tony Reinke,

“This is why gospel preaching is so amazing. We offer the gospel to all. We let the gospel-lion out of its cage to do its work in separating sheep from goats, vessels of mercy from vessels of wrath. ‘For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.’ (1 Cor. 1:18)”<sup>11</sup>

But this is also why the Gospel is so humbling. As Erik Raymond notes:

“Once again the Christian is brought back to reality and escorted unto humility as we are reminded that without God’s loving, merciful, conquering grace in our lives, we would stiffen our necks and harden our hearts in persistent devaluation of the God who powerfully reveals himself.”<sup>12</sup>

To which I reply: But for the grace of God, go I...

Of course this raises new questions, doesn’t it? Like “Is this really fair for God to operate on Pharaoh or other people in this way?” That question is actually asked in the New Testament and it’s asked in response to an illustration involving the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart. So come next week and we will have a look at what God says about that specifically and a couple other amazing things...

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Does God Desire All to Be Saved?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Having said that, the nature of this sermon is frustrating. It will be frustrating for some of you because this is something you have given a lot of thought to and I will not be able to push quite as far into the matter as you will like. Others of you will be frustrated because inevitably these kinds of sermons tend to raise additional questions in your mind that we will not have time to address. Most of us will be frustrated because this topic involves various mysteries and as Westerners we don’t do well with mystery. Still others will be frustrated because by nature your mind is not as curious such things and so this will seem like much ado about nothing. You could care less. And there’s nothing wrong with that necessarily. Finally, it will be frustrating to me because, as with most sermons, the vast majority of what I would like to say I will not be able to say for various reasons, not least of which our time constraints this morning. All that to say...Sorry.

<sup>3</sup> Though I would point to the presence of “framing” as a literary device, if I had more time and this were a different setting.

<sup>4</sup> I would also have expected no more references to Pharaoh hardening his own heart after the text states that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. What you find instead is a jumping back and forth between the wordings, especially in the middle plagues. So in response to the fourth plague, for instance, we read “*Pharaoh hardened his heart*” (8:32). The sixth plague concludes by noting that “*he LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh*” (9:12). But then the next plague speaks of Pharaoh hardening his own hearth again (9:34-35). Then the Lord gets credit for the hardening in the eighth plague (10:1). So there is a bit of a back and forth, which suggests it’s not quite as simple as the impression many people have of Pharaoh acting first followed by God.

<sup>5</sup> C. Marvin Pate, *Romans* (Teach the Text Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 192.

<sup>6</sup> I am not denying that there is still mystery in how God’s hardening and Pharaoh’s hardening go together. And I am not denying that there is mystery in the fact that Pharaoh is still responsible (indeed, I will deal with that more directly in the next sermon). In fact, I think that is precisely why the text states in those few instances that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. “This alternative cause perhaps teaches that Pharaoh is responsible for his own sin, while at the same time he is under the sovereign hand of the Lord. This appears to be the conclusion that the apostle Paul draws on the matter (Rom. 9:14-24).” John D. Currid, “Exodus” in *A Biblical and Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 82. This is something that the next sermon will address with some considerations on theological “compatibilism.”

<sup>7</sup> I think it’s important to do this in sequence (though most theologians, surprisingly, have not!). So let’s run through them and see if we can discern who is responsible for the hardening in each case. You can keep score, if you’d like.

“*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.”*” (Exodus 4:21)

That one goes in the God’s column. It explicitly says that He would cause the hardening. Here’s the next reference.

“*But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart...*” (Exodus 7:3)



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The Lord is speaking, so that one goes in His column as well...

*“Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”* (Exodus 7:13)

We’ve discussed this one, but it seems to point to the Lord as the cause from two angles—the context of chapter 4 and the statement *“as the LORD had said.”* The next reference comes in the next verse...

*“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.’”* (Exodus 7:14)

That points back to the hardening of the previous verse, so it too seems to be owing to the Lord’s agency. The next occurrence is found at the end of the first plague...

*“But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”* (Exodus 7:22)

This is one of the ambiguous statements. But notice that the final statement. This too happened *“as the LORD had said”* and therefore God should be seen as the one hardening Pharaoh’s heart... At the end of the second plague we read,

*“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 8:15).

This is the first instance where Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart. But notice that even this is said to have happened *“as the LORD had said.”* This suggests that even though Pharaoh is seen as participating in the callousness of his heart condition, it is not happening independently from the Lord’s hardening activity. Even here then the Lord can still be seen as the primary cause... Look at the next reference...

*“But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”* (Exodus 8:19)

There’s our phrase again... Exodus 8:32 is our next reference.

*“But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.”* (Exodus 8:32)

This one is interesting. Pharaoh hardens his own heart. We don’t see the phrase. But we do find an important word that’s easy to overlook—*“also.”* That little word suggests that this instance is like the previous one, presumably the previous one where Pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart, which was Exodus 8:15. As we’ve seen, that one did happen according to what God said and thus both should be seen as implying divine agency. Pharaoh is hardening his own heart in a sense, but not independent of God’s work in his heart. Here’s the next instance...

*“...But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.”* (Exodus 9:7)

This one is truly ambiguous. The only ambiguous one, in fact. It doesn’t say who does the hardening and it doesn’t have the phrase about what the Lord has said. But given that all of the previous references connect to the Lord hardening Pharaoh, I think that would be a safe assumption here as well.

*“But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses.”* (Exodus 9:12)

This one is obvious, so let’s keep moving...

*“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. <sup>35</sup> So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.”* (Exodus 9:34-35)

This is the third and final instance of Pharaoh hardening his own heart. But it does have a reference to what God said he would do and it does have that word *“again”* connected to the hardening of his heart, both of which suggest that it should be read like the previous instances.

Every other instance, from this point forward, explicitly says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8; cf. 14:17). I’ll save some time and let you verify that on your own. But as you can see, when we read them in context and in succession, God is seen as the first cause of the hardening and Pharaoh’s role in the process is a result of God’s hardening, not its cause. (For a more detailed analysis of this, see G. K. Beale’s article, “An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9” in *Trinity Journal* (5) NS (1984), 129-154, which as of the date preaching could be accessed freely online at the following web address: [http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/otesources/02-exodus/Text/Articles/Beale-Hardening-TJ.htm](http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/02-exodus/Text/Articles/Beale-Hardening-TJ.htm)).

<sup>8</sup> John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic: 1993), 174.

<sup>9</sup> Erik Raymond writes, “Well how did God harden Pharaoh’s heart? God simply revealed himself. He revealed his power, supremacy, love for his people, hatred of sin, etc...through the signs and wonders of the plagues. It was this revelation of God that hardened his heart...So we come back to the old and familiar issue of unbelief...The unbeliever hates and suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. The issue is neither with the revelation nor the Revealer *but instead* it is the receiver of the revelation that is on the hook. It is the sinner that must be conquered and this is because he is a sinner! And so the need for powerful irresistible grace is clear!” (Eric Raymond, “Why and How Did God ‘Harden’ Pharaoh’s Heart?”, which could be accessed online as of the date of preaching at: <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/erikraymond/2009/08/06/why-and-how-did-god-harden-pharaohs-heart/>).

<sup>10</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Bible, 2008), 1847-1848 n. 13:12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Reinke, “You Asked: Does God Harden a Believer’s Heart?”, accessed as of the day of preaching at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/you-asked-does-god-harden-a-believers-heart>.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond, “Why and How Did God ‘Harden’ Pharaoh’s Heart?”