

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C0607 – February 15, 2006 – Ex 4:18-23 – The Hardening Process Of Pharaoh's Heart

¹⁸ Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

Now Moses was 80 years old. It had been 40 years since he had gone out to see his **brethren** the first time (Exod 2:11). Moses simply asks **his father-in-law** for permission to go see them. Moses doesn't disclose his divine commission but simply a desire to **see if they are still alive**. This request makes it possible for us to gain great insight into Moses' attitude toward all that YHWH told him. Moses is not even sure his brethren in Egypt **are still alive**. If they were dead it would mean that YHWH's covenant promises had been broken. Consequently, it would mean that YHWH was not faithful. If YHWH had failed Israel how could Moses trust Him? Before Moses trusts YHWH he wants to go and see for himself whether they are even alive! He is curious enough to go to Egypt but it appears that he is not convinced of YHWH's commission and he only wants to sneak up there and see what the situation is. And remember, this doubt comes *after* the miraculous acts of YHWH at the burning bush.

PRINCIPLE: Supernatural revelation, even one involving miracles, does not usually result in faith.¹

- Those who don't believe God's word request miracles

John 6:30 So they said to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may *see*, and *believe* You?"

- If a miracle occurs they will not believe

Luke 16:30-31 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' ³¹ "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"

- If a person believes God's word he will see

John 11:40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

The principle in Scripture is this

1. If the unbelieving sees he will not believe
2. If one believes he will see

We must be given eyes to see and God gives us eyes to see when we believe (and not before). If you say, "I will not believe until I see the signs," then God will not give you the eyes to see. The world says "seeing is believing". The Bible says "believing is seeing". We believe in order to see. We don't see in order to believe. Jesus chided Thomas when he believed because he saw. He blessed those who did not see and yet believed (John 20:29). God is looking for those who will have faith in His word and not in their sight. This does not mean our faith is blind. It is firmly based on God's word. Faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17). It doesn't say faith comes by seeing miracles. Moses didn't need more miracles in order to believe YHWH. He needed to hear more divine revelation which YHWH now gives him.

¹⁹ Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead."

Moses didn't immediately set out for Egypt. He milled around in Midian until YHWH said, **go back to Egypt** and assured him that those **seeking his life** were **dead**. YHWH's command reveals three things. First, since **all the men who were seeking his life** were **dead** Moses has no reasonable justification for not going **back to Egypt**. All obstacles have been removed. Second, it reveals that YHWH knew the inner hearts of all the men in Egypt and which one's sought to kill Moses and that those men were dead. Third, it reveals that YHWH is not a local deity but an omnipresent deity. He knows the situation in Egypt even while He speaks to Moses in Midian.

²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sonsⁱⁱ and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand.

Finally Moses obeys. This verse is out of sequence. Moses actually left for Egypt after verse 23 because YHWH keeps talking to him in verses 21-23. To load up his family and go demonstrated that he had faith in YHWH. He believed what YHWH said. That is always the issue. Will you believe God's word or not?

PRINCIPAL: The issue is always whether we believe God's word or not. Once we come to know God's word then the issue is whether we really believe God's word? Often the commands of God require us to act in a way that conflicts with the way natural human wisdom would act. Often the Scriptural way seems impractical and even a hindrance to success. Yet, I think that is the whole point. God wants us to follow His commands so that He can intervene and do something out of the ordinary so that others see God at work.

The issue with Moses was whether he would believe God's word and go to Egypt. When Moses mounted his family on a donkey and headed to Egypt God could intervene and do something out of the ordinary. He could take a slave people out from under the bondage of the Egyptian superpower and at the same time destroy their economic base and give it to Israel.ⁱⁱⁱ Through this His power would be demonstrated and His name would be proclaimed through all the earth (Exod 9:16; Josh 2:8-11). Do you believe God's word? Do you really believe it? If so, obey it, let it spring in to action. What is hindering you from believing Him?

²¹ The LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which 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 son, My firstborn.

²³ "So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.'"

YHWH also **said to Moses** all that Moses would do and say in **Egypt**. This is a summary of all of Moses' future exchanges with Pharaoh until the final plague.

1. He would perform 10 miracles in Pharaoh's presence with the staff of God
2. He would command in YHWH's name that Pharaoh let Israel go

3. YHWH will harden Pharaoh's heart
4. Pharaoh will not let the people go
5. Because of Pharaoh's refusal YHWH will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son

Here there is a difficulty that all serious exegetes have worked hard to resolve. It may be formulated thus:

If it is the Lord who hardens the heart of Pharaoh then
Pharaoh cannot be blamed for this and
consequently it is unethical for the Lord to judge him

The solution to this problem lies in the fact that “the whole contest between God and Pharaoh must be interpreted by what God said to Moses before ever the contest started: ‘The king of Egypt *will not*’ (Exod 3:19). The will was already set. The heart was already hard.”^{iv}

Thus, it was not that Pharaoh “could not” let them go but that he “would not” let them go! The hardness of his heart refused to let them go!

Exodus 10:27 But the LORD *hardened* (chazak) Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to let them go.

Exodus 7:14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is stubborn (kabedh); he refuses to let the people go.

There is a difference between being “unable” to do something and being “unwilling” to do something. For example, if you ask me to go to the store for you but I am “unable” to go because I don't have a car that is different from having a car but being “unwilling” to go. The difference is that only one of them is a moral issue. I can't really be held responsible for not being “able” to go to the store! But I can be held morally responsible for not being “willing” to go to the store when I'm perfectly able! Inability to let the people go was not Pharaoh's problem. He was the most powerful man on earth! He could let them go if he wanted to. The bottom line is that he did not want them to go. Their slave labor was building his empire and providing a tremendous economy.

Three times God predicted His own response to Pharaoh's negative volition.

Exodus 4:21 "When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will *harden* (chazak) his heart so that he will not let the people go.

Exodus 7:3 "But I will *harden* (qashah) Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 14:4 "Thus I will *harden* (chazak) Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD."

Three Hebrew verbs are translated “harden” in this historical process.

- A. **chazak** - 11 times = “to strengthen, to grow firm”
- B. **kabedh** – 6 times = “to make heavy”
- C. **qashah** – 1 time = “to be hard, stiff”

The dominant word is *chazak*. It is used 11 out of the 18 times. This word means “to strengthen, to firm up” that which is already there. For example, it is used in the Book of Joshua when YHWH told Joshua to be “strong and courageous” (Josh 1:6, 7, 9, 18; 10:25). Joshua and Israel were to “strengthen” that which was already there. The point is that YHWH would strengthen the already present state of Pharaoh’s heart. So, let’s trace the historical process of Pharaoh’s hardening.

PHARAOH HARDENS HIS HEART (Volition)	PHARAOH’S HEART WAS HARDENED (State)	GOD HARDENED PHARAOH’S HEART (Judicial)
All Hiphil – causative	All Kal – simple action	
	7:13 chazak	
	7:14 kabedh	
	7:22 chazak	
8:15 kabedh		
	8:19 chazak	
8:32 kabedh		
	9:7 kabedh	
		9:12 chazak
9:34 kabedh		
	9:35 chazak	
		10:1 kabedh
		10:20 chazak
		10:27 chazak
		11:10 chazak

First, Pharaoh's heart is already in a hardened state (7:13, 14, 22). Second, because of this hardened state when He encountered YHWH's command he hardened his heart further in 8:15. This resulted in Pharaoh's heart reaching a further hardened state (8:19). Only after Pharaoh hardens his own heart did God judicially harden Pharaoh's heart (9:12). The word used in 9:12 of God's hardening Pharaoh is *chazak* which means God "strengthened" the state of Pharaoh's heart. In other words, because Pharaoh's heart was already in a state of hardness and because Pharaoh had already responded by negative volition to YHWH's requests YHWH is completely just in judicially hardening Pharaoh's heart in 9:12.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Pharaoh's heart was already in a hardened state (7:13, 14, 22).
2. Pharaoh hardened his heart twice (8:15, 32) before God hardened his heart (9:12).
3. It is not that Pharaoh "could not" let them go but that he "would not".
4. Pharaoh was hell-bent on not letting Israel go (10:10).
5. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart only "strengthened" the hardness of his heart.

God was completely just in the way in which He dealt with Pharaoh. But what about Roman 9:17-18? What is this difficult passage teaching?^v There is no doubt it has bothered many a Christian.

Romans 9:17-18 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH." ¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He *hardens* whom He desires.

Is this a before time decree of Pharaoh's eternal damnation? No, far from it. First, "The words 'raised thee up' do not mean that God had raised him up from *birth* for this purpose: they refer to his elevation to the highest throne on earth." God elevated him as supreme ruler on earth. When Paul says, 'And He hardens whom He desires', we need not try to soften this. God did not override Pharaoh's will." Pharaoh's heart was already in a state of hardness. In passing, we might note that this passage has nothing to do with Pharaoh's eternal salvation. It rather has to do with God's purposes. God did not say to "Moses, 'I have chosen Pharaoh, and I am going to send him to hell.' He didn't say that." Eternal salvation or damnation is not the issue in Romans 9. Dr. Griffith Thomas said, "It

does not mean that Pharaoh was hardened for the mere sake of hardening... We know from the history that it was Pharaoh's disobedience alone that led to his being hardened. Neither Pharaoh nor anyone else is ever created in order to be hardened." Vincent said, "Persistent disobedience and resistance, working their natural result of inflated pride and presumptuous foolhardiness, wrought out a condition of heart which invited and insured judgment... The operation of these forces did not exclude moral agency or moral freedom. No irresistible constraint compelled Pharaoh to yield to this pressure toward evil. His power of choice was recognized, assumed, and appealed to... God's dealing with Pharaoh was marked by forbearance, opportunities for repentance, instruction, and chastisement." H.H. Rowley said, "These passages would seem to suggest that Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelites go was something for which not he but God was responsible, and he was but executing the will of God in all that he did. Such a view on the face of it would make nonsense of the whole story... That Pharaoh is not thought of as a mere puppet is made quite clear by the passages which state that Pharaoh hardened his own heart." His acts could then be used to serve God's purposes. But that does not remove his full responsibility for his actions.

We can conclude with the following observations.

1. All men are born equally depraved
2. All men are not equally hardened
3. Men harden themselves to the revelation of God
4. God is just when he hardens them further

What else does the Bible teach about hardening? First, God commanded Israel not to harden their hearts against Him.

Psalm 95:8 Do not *harden* your hearts, as at Meribah, As in the day of Massah in the wilderness,^{vi}

Yet God permitted certain things under the Mosaic Law because of the hardness of their hearts. For example, divorce.

Matthew 19:8 "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.

What if their hearts were not hard? What if they had soft hearts? Then is divorce permitted? Look over in Matt 23:37 at the hardness of the nation's heart.

Matthew 23:37-39 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.³⁸ "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!³⁹ "For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'"

Jesus was willing; Israel was unwilling (23:37). They had hard hearts. This was a moral issue! As a result, Jesus pronounced judgment on Jerusalem and the Temple. "your house is being left to you desolate" (23:38). Another result was that the nation was partially hardened (Rom 11:25). God did not harden the nation apart from their unwillingness to accept their King! He hardened the nation because of their unwillingness to accept Jesus as Messiah. In verse 39 Jesus says, "you will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" In other words, I'm not going to return until you're hearts are changed and you are willing to accept Me as the Messiah. How and when will the nation be made willing to say this? How? Extreme judgment. When? The "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer 30:6-7). Daniel asked...

Daniel 12:6 "How long *will it be* until the end of *these* wonders?"

Daniel 12:7 it would be for a time, times, and half *a time*; and as soon as they finish shattering the power of the holy people, all these *events* will be completed.

Israel's hard hearts (which they were commanded not to have) have to be shattered; they have to be crushed; they have to be broken; they must have nowhere else to turn but YHWH. That is a major purpose of the 2nd half of the Tribulation! God knows what it will take to break the will of the holy people and that is what He will do. He has carefully calculated His judgments to soften their hearts so they will respond positively to His word and will call upon YHWH to rescue them. We know that 2/3 of Israel will only harden their hearts more and 1/3 will soften their hearts.

That's what is happening with Pharaoh. God is hardening an already hardened heart. God's further strengthening of Pharaoh's heart has as its goal to reveal the Almighty Power of God and the proclamation of YHWH's name throughout the whole earth. This contest will demonstrate that it was not Pharaoh who delivered Israel but YHWH. Since Pharaoh was considered a god this would demonstrate that YHWH was sovereign and Pharaoh was not.

The NT gives the same command.

Hebrews 3:8 DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS,
Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
Hebrews 3:15-19 "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME." ¹⁶ For who provoked *Him* when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt *led* by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ *So* we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.
Hebrews 4:7 "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS."

Yet over and over people hardened themselves to God's word. For example, Christ became angry and grieved at their hardened hearts.

Mark 3:5-6 After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately *began* conspiring with the Herodians against Him, *as to* how they might destroy Him.

How could He be angry and grieve about their hardness if God had determined it from before the foundation of the world?

Those who have a hardened heart are spiritually dull.

Mark 8:17-18 "Why do you discuss *the fact* that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? ¹⁸ "HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR?"

Believers and unbelievers who do not understand Scripture evidence a hardness of heart. Eye-witness reports of miracles often do not overcome unbelief and hardness of heart.

Mark 16:14 Afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining *at the table*; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen.

His own apostles did not believe the reports of His resurrection. Why didn't they believe the reports? Because they didn't believe God's word. The OT taught resurrection (Ex 3:14, Dan 12:2, 13). Jesus had told them He would have to die but that He would be raised (John 2:19-21). But since they didn't believe God's word they didn't believe the resurrection reports. Because of this Jesus reproached them. They should have believed. Everything in Scripture pointed to Christ's resurrection!

If God decreed before the foundation of the world that some would have hardness of heart then how can Jesus "reproach" them for their hardness of heart? If they have to do it what grounds are there for rapprochement? Jesus was and is the best theologian there ever will be and He did not accept the idea that God determined that some people would harden their hearts and there is nothing they could do about it.

The veil is not taken away and then people turn to the Lord but the people turn to the Lord and as a result the veil is taken away.

2 Corinthians 3:14-16 ¹⁴ But their minds were *hardened*; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. ¹⁵ But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; ¹⁶ but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Do you see that? "When" a person turns to the Lord the veil is taken away. Most people think that when God removes the veil then a person can believe in the Lord. No, no, that's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that they hear the word and hear the word and their minds are hardened against God but during this whole process the word is calling them to believe, believe, believe, and if a person does believe then the veil is taken away. The veil is removed "in Christ" and not before one is "in Christ". Faith is the condition for being "in Christ" so faith must come first before God removes the veil in Christ. It's not that they "can't" believe; it's that they "won't" believe. They are in moral rebellion against God. They refuse to believe.

God never created anyone in order to harden them. People harden themselves toward God and then God is completely just in strengthening their hardness. The purpose of God hardening Pharaoh was to break him so that he would let the people go. This would display that it was ultimately God who brought about their deliverance and not Pharaoh! By the end of it there could be no mistake. He would get all the glory and His name would spread all over the earth.

PRINCIPLE: Do not harden your heart. A hard heart will stifle your spiritual growth tremendously.

How does hardening occur? By not responding positively to the word of God. If you hear the word, hear the word, hear the word but you don't do anything with it, if there's no positive volition toward it you will harden. You wonder how some people can hear Bible teaching year after year and nothing happens. Something happens and you wonder, "where has this person been all these years? They've been here every Sunday." Yeah, their body was here but there was no positive response to the word of God. Because of it their hearts are being calloused. They become thick skinned to the word of God. Hardening up against God. Don't harden your heart. The word of God never returns void, it always strengthens the present condition of our heart. It's like the sun striking two different substances.

"The sun, by the force of its heat, moistens...wax and dries...clay, softening the one and hardening the other; and as this produces opposite effects by the same power, so, through the long-suffering of God, which reaches to all...some are softened and others hardened' (Theodoret).

Do you have a heart of wax or a heart of clay?

CONCLUSION

God knows the condition of our hearts. He knows our nature so intimately that He knows exactly how we would respond in any given situation. He knew that Pharaoh would not let the people go (Exod 3:19). It was not that Pharaoh could not let them go. It was simply that he refused to let them go. God knew exactly how much judgment would be required for Pharaoh to let them go. Pharaoh's heart was already in a state of hardness and then he hardened his heart further before God hardened his heart. God only strengthened the state of Pharaoh's heart. God never created anyone for the purpose of hardening them. God never created anyone to go to hell (Matt 25:41). God never predestined anyone to go to hell. God wishes for all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of truth (1 Tim 2:4). Those who hear the word of God and harden their hearts to it endanger themselves of being further hardened by God.

1. Doctrine of Seeing is Not Believing. Supernatural revelation, even one involving miracles, does not usually result in faith.
2. Doctrine of Faith. The issue is always whether we believe God's word or not.

3. Doctrine of Hardening. Do not harden your heart. A hard heart will endanger you to God's further hardening of that condition and will stifle your spiritual growth tremendously.

[For A Supplemental Exegesis Of Exodus 4:24-31 Click Here](#)

ⁱ Miracles were important to verify that a prophet was of God. Yet miracles alone were not enough. The main criteria was that the message was consistent with previous divine revelation. In the NT era, the test is to compare the speaker's message with God's word (1 John 4:1ff).

ⁱⁱ The plural **sons** may be a scribal error. At this point it seems that Moses has only one **son**.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moses would have to believe that he had encountered YHWH and that YHWH knew the heart of each person who wanted to kill him and that each one of them was already dead.

^{iv} Samuel Fisk, *Election & Predestination*, 126.

^v Romans 9 has been radically misconstrued by many expositors, probably because of influence by the faulty exposition of Augustine and later Calvin who followed suit. It is often taught that the issue here is election to salvation. It has nothing to do with that. This chapter is not about the individual election of some to salvation such as Abraham or Esau and the non-election of others like Pharaoh. This chapter is dealing with dispensational and national issues. The big question every Jew would ask at the end of chapter 8 is "if nothing can separate us from the love of God" then what about Israel? It appears that Israel has been separated from the love of God? What do you have to say to that Paul?

^{vi} **Exodus 17:2** Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." ⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?"

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