

Who Hardens the Heart?

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Exodus

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Good morning. Please take your Bibles and turn with me to the Old Testament book of Exodus. I'll be reading Exodus 7:1-13.

1 And the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. 2 You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. 3 But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, 4 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. 5 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." 6 Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the LORD commanded them. 7 Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh. 8 Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 9 "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.'" 10 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. 11 Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. 12 For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. 13 Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

This is the word of the Lord.

Just before we pray, you will see a picture of a local congregation here in town and I want us to pray for them as we pray for ourselves this morning, the good folks at Mount Washington First Baptist Church. Let's pray.

Our Father, we just as our brothers and sisters at Mount Washington First Baptist, we have need to persevere, to remain faithful in an unfaithful world. There are many challenges for us. That is why we desperately need to assemble together as certainly the much more as we see the day approaching, the day of the Lord. And so as they gather, as we gather, may we be inspired, refreshed, encouraged, hope renewed. If there is anyone there or here that is in a dangerous place spiritually, gradually hardening their heart, Lord, help us see the danger, awaken us to the danger, rescue us from the danger, have mercy upon us. We ask this for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, what are, let me ask you a question, what are the deadliest animals in America? What would you suppose the deadliest animals are? You might think of bears. A bear is pretty dangerous. Wolves. Mountain lions. Maybe rattlesnakes. They're all pretty dangerous but are they the most dangerous, maybe are they the deadliest, let's ask you that, are they the deadliest animals? Actually none of these in America are the deadliest animals. You might be surprised to know that out of all the animals, strangely enough the most dangerous is a deer. Deers kill 120 people in the United States every year through car accidents this time of the year, right now between now and through December. In fact, bears only kill one person per year; mountain lions only kill one person per year. In fact, rattlesnakes kill less than one person per year. But you know, we're certainly afraid of bears and mountain lions and rattlesnakes, aren't we? We're fearful of them, I am, which means it's all to say that sometimes our fears can be misplaced. We're fearing bears when the fact is right now during this time of the year it can be a deer. Quite often our fear of the "worst thing that could happen" to us is not the worst thing that could happen to us. What might be the worst thing that could happen to us? And I want to propose to you this morning the worst thing that could happen to you and I is the hardened of our heart. I want to make that case this morning from God's word.

We are studying through the book of Exodus and, my goodness, there is so much. You know, we're not doing a verse by verse study and if we were, there's plenty plenty there to keep us involved for years to come but we're kind of doing a flyover and hitting most of the high spots and here's what we are learning. The Israelites, not remember the Israelites are those descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are living in Egypt. They've been there 450 years under severe oppression and bondage and you remember God had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, "I'm gonna make your people multiply. Your descendants are gonna outnumber the stars in the heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore." So that's what we've seen happen in the book of Exodus, I mean, they're multiplying like crazy and that's what's caused the Pharaoh of Egypt to go out of his mind to say, "We've got to do something about this." But remember, God also promised these people a land. He promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, "Not only are your people are gonna multiply but I'm gonna bring you into a land of your own, the Promised Land." And in order to get his people to the Promised Land, he must get them out of Egypt and that is what we're seeing in the early parts of the book of Exodus.

So God sends Moses to Pharaoh with a message from God. What is that message? "Let my people go that they may serve me." But Pharaoh will not do it and there's a reason why. Oh, we could probably throw a number of reasons on the table but there's one

primary reason, at this point in the Exodus story, we come up against a theme and that is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. We see it in chapter 4, the beginning, but we see it again in chapter 7, and we see it time and time again throughout the book of Exodus and we see the same theme going through the Bible. We even see it addressed to the church in the book of Hebrews. So here's what I'd like to do, big subject, massive, so I want to kind of bring it down into just a few questions. First, what is a hardened heart? We'll ask that in a moment. What is a hardened heart? Then who hardened Pharaoh's heart? Who did that? And then thirdly, how can a hard heart become a soft heart?

So first question, let's look at it: what is a hardened heart? Well, first, we need to define what a heart is. What is the Bible talking about when it speaks of a heart? It's not talking about our fleshly heart, okay? It's just talking about the very center of our being, you know, what makes us tick, you see. That's why we're told in the Bible, guard your heart, guard your heart. Why? Because out of your heart flows the streams of life, you see. I mean, everything we are it's our heart, our emotions, our intellect, our thinking, our affections. Heart is a big issue, okay?

So what is a hardened heart? Well, we often think in modern times, in 2018, you know, if someone said, "She has a hard heart," they might be thinking in terms of a lack of compassion or a heart that's cruel. There's a cruel person. They don't have any compassion. But that's not what the Bible means when it speaks of a hardened heart. When the Bible speaks of a hardened heart, it has to do, one, with determination, what a person's resolve is, their determination, what they're resolved to do. Hardening of heart means an obstinate unwillingness to change directions. Not so much about cruel, not so much about lack of compassion, those things might come with it but it's not so much that. It's an unwillingness to change direction and that could be a positive thing like, "I'm gonna stick with this. I'm gonna stick with it and nobody's gonna change it." That can be a positive thing, but it can also be very deadly, very negative. Hardening of heart is a strong resolute stubbornness. It's a psychological moral and spiritual quality that manifests itself in these way: a refusal to listen; a rebellious disobedience; and in particular the Bible speaks of hardness of heart toward God. That's the primary way I want you to think about it this morning because that's when the Bible speaks about hardness of heart, it's talking about our response to God, an unwillingness to listen, a rebellious disobedience.

And where do we see this in such a vivid way? Ephesians 4. I just want to look at this verse just for a few minutes here and kind of understand what hardness of heart is. "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart." Now first off, this is Paul writing in a letter to the church at Ephesus. Let's hold it up there for just a moment. Paul is describing life before Christ. He's talking to the church and saying, "This is how you used to be. This is how you used to live. You were born into this. You were born with a propensity toward hardness of heart."

So first, it's describing life before Christ. Notice it says, "They are darkened in their understanding." Now what is that referring to? It's a result of going one's own way rather

than God's way. What did Adam and Eve do? They went their own way. God said, "This is the way to go," and they rebelled against him and went their own way. What happens when that takes place? Their mind becomes blind to truth, to reality. It's kind of like if you could picture, it's a person instead of walking toward the light, they walk toward darkness, and as they walk toward darkness their understanding is darkened, you see?

So first, there's a darkened understanding for us who were outside of Christ, okay? But then it says we were separated from, notice this, from the life of God. Notice. It's interesting, it doesn't say we're separated from God even though you could make a case for that, but specifically it says separated from the life of God. In other words, we were separated from the life of God that God possesses in himself because we had no relationship with him. You see, in other words, when you're out of a relationship with God, you do not have the life of God in your soul, but conversely when you are in relationship with God through faith in Christ, you actually are given the life of God in your soul.

By the way, think about this, the Christian life is not simply about affirming a set of truths. I mean, look, we've all gone through this before, right? I have this conversation all the time, people say, "I'm really concerned about my brother. I'm really concerned about my spouse because they say, listen, they say they believe, they say they believe." Like for example, you know, they'll say, you'll say to them, "Honey, do you believe in Jesus?" "Yeah, I believe in Jesus." "Honey, do you believe that Jesus died for your sins?" "Oh, of course I believe that." Notice they're affirming a set of truths, propositional truth, they're affirming these truths but these truths have no impact on how they live their life. Why? Because oftentimes you can affirm truths but not have the life of God in your soul that animates you toward Christ-likeness, you see. So I want to point out here the Christian life is a whole way of life. The Christian life is a whole way of life, not just part, not just a little compartment over here that we have on Sunday and it doesn't have anything else to do with the rest of our lives. No, the Christian life is a whole way of life. Why? Because when we come to Christ, we're made in relationship with God and he gives us the life of God in our souls. That's not our subject but I just want to point this out.

Then it says ignorance. Notice it says "because of the ignorance that is in them." Now what does that mean? Does that mean, "I just don't know. I just don't know." No, it's not that. No, ignorance here is ignoring God, ignoring God and failing to obey him. You see, darkened in understanding, we've gone our own way, we've walked away from God, we're separated from the life of God, and naturally now we're ignorant. We just flat-out ignore God. But notice what it says next, all of this is due, a result of their hardness of heart. So let's be clear here, the concept of hardness of heart is a hardness toward God. A hard heart, let's just kind of sum it up this way, a hard heart is an obstinate and calloused heart that fails to respond to God or obey him, and is blind to the precious value of the Gospel of grace and refuses to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In other words, you can, a person, listen, a person is we're gonna see, a person can be around all kinds of religious trappings and still have a hardened heart toward God.

Second question: who hardened Pharaoh's heart? Now this is the question of the ages, okay? Notice in our text, what did it say in chapter 7 is that, "I will," God said, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart. I will harden Pharaoh's heart." But then we're gonna see later on down the road here, we're gonna read it in other context but we're gonna find where Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

There are 10 passages where the hardening of the heart is ascribed to God doing it, then there are 10 passages where it is ascribed to Pharaoh doing it. I want you to see a couple of verses on the overhead here. In our text it says, "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you." But then in Exodus 8, "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.' But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said."

Now here's the question that we are faced with and this has been a question, a lot of ink has been spilled over this: is God, when it says God hardened Pharaoh's heart, is God acting in such a way as to prevent Pharaoh's free choice? So you might look, you might read this and you go, "Well, whoa, whoa, whoa, God hardened his heart. God didn't give him a chance. God didn't, God wasn't being fair. He wasn't letting Pharaoh act on his own." I want you to see a quote by Australian theologian Leon Morris, who I appreciate very much. Here's what he said about that concept. "Neither here nor anywhere else is God said to harden anyone who has not first hardened themselves; that Pharaoh hardened his heart against God and refused to humble himself is made plain in the story." What he's pointing out is we do see where God hardened Pharaoh's heart but we also see where Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Pharaoh alone was the agent of the hardening of his own heart.

There's no suggestion that God forced Pharaoh to act against his own will. In fact, this is interesting, as we go through the Exodus story, we're gonna see in the weeks to come, we're gonna see what were called plagues were poured out upon Egypt and they were kind of evangelistic in tone because God states evangelistic purposes behind the plagues when he said this, "That you may know that I am the Lord." Notice, "I'm gonna send this plague of frogs, I'm gonna send this plague of gnats, I'm gonna send these?" What? Why? "That you might know. That you might know that I am the Lord." Yet, listen, in spite of the signs and wonders, Pharaoh chose evil. God did not choose it for him. In spite of all of the miraculous signs that we're gonna read about in the weeks to come, in spite of all the wonders that God did, Pharaoh had a front row seat to them, still he did not choose God, he chose evil, and God did not choose it for him. And you might add when you think about this, when you think about, if you just think about this long enough, Pharaoh had a front row seat. In other words, this process of hardening can go on when a person is sitting in religious activities, singing can go on, praying can go on, the word of God proclaimed, and still hearing it but not obeying it, hearing the call of God upon their heart and still resisting and gradually hardening their own heart.

Yet we are faced with the fact that the Scriptures do say God hardened Pharaoh's heart. What are we to make of that? What does that mean when it says God hardened his heart?

We know that Pharaoh hardened his own heart as well, we know that, but what does it mean for God to harden a person's heart? It means that God was giving Pharaoh over to his own stubbornness. It's kind of like, you know, you might walk over, take the tie on the boat and just untie it and let it go. It could be tied up, keep you right here, but what if we untie it and just let you go where you want to go? Where did Pharaoh want to go? He wanted to go the way of resisting, stubbornness.

Pharaoh had a front seat to God's power and, well, fine, there was times where Pharaoh would go, "Okay, okay, you can go." It seemed like he'd make one step toward, okay maybe, and then he takes two steps back, you see. We'll see that, yeah, and that's what we see today, some, they'll take a step forward and they're like, "Oh yeah, well, I might be interested. Well, no, no, no, I'm not interested." You see, Pharaoh decided to resist God and God reinforced him in that decision. "You want to go that way? Okay." When God hardens someone, God doesn't create the hardness, he simply allows the person to go their own way and suffer the consequences.

Friend, that's why I say I can't think of anything more dangerous that can happen to us than to harden our heart against God and then God to reinforce that hardening, a hardening that he doesn't create. This should certainly give the person pause who is resisting the grace of God in Jesus Christ because you may look and you go, "Man, I can't, I just can't believe that all those miracles, all those plagues, that Pharaoh didn't just come and say, 'God, have mercy on me!' I can't believe he didn't do that!" Friend, we have people sitting in churches today that have refused and resisted and they're stubborn and they don't want to be there, they're there because someone made them be there, they're compelled by someone else, and they're there and they're missing the greatest beauty of the greatest miracle of all, of Christ's resurrection from the dead and this should give us pause. It should give us pause to think, "Could I be hardening my heart against God?"

That brings me to a final question or maybe the most important one: how can a hard heart become soft? Is that possible? You see, first we need to ask ourselves, just ask yourself, "Do I have a soft heart or a hard heart?" Remember, it's not about you being cruel or lack of compassion. That should be a concern but, "Do I have a soft heart toward God? Do I love God?" I'm not asking do you believe in him. Oh, my goodness, everybody believes in God, but do you love him? Do you have a trajectory of heart that you want to obey him? You see, first, do we have a hard heart or a soft heart? Yet if the fruit of a hard heart is rebellion and stubbornness and disobedience and ignoring God, then the fruit of a soft heart would be obedience to God, a humble compliance with his will.

So how does a person with a hard heart, let's just take myself, I had a hard heart toward God. I was raised in church but I had a hard heart. I didn't want to obey God. I didn't want to and I resisted his will. I wanted nothing to do with that. Even though I could quote Scripture, I could sing Christian songs, but my life in general, I had no trajectory toward God. I was walking toward darkness. So how, how, how does a hard heart, a heart of resistance and stubbornness toward God, how, how is a hard heart made soft? And the

answer is this: you need a new heart. You need a new heart. The only way that a hard heart can be changed is you need a new heart.

Remember when Jesus was standing with his disciples and it was getting near his death and he was having his last supper with his disciples and he said to them, he says, "Here's the cup of my blood shed to purchase the promise of the new covenant." What was he meaning there? You know, "Here, this cup represents my blood that was shed, the blood of the new covenant." In other words, "My life, the giving of my life is gonna purchase this new covenant, this new agreement between God and man." What was he referring to? In Ezekiel 36 we read these words. Here's a portion, a portion of this new agreement, this new covenant. God said, "I will give you a new heart." Just right there, stop and go what God is saying here, God is saying, "I'm gonna give you a new heart." What kind of heart is it gonna be? "I'll give you a new heart and a new spirit. I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone." Now what does that mean? That unresponsive, that stubborn rebellious heart. "I'm gonna remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, a soft heart, a pliable heart, a heart I can work with." A heart like this where it says, "And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." This is God saying, "I'm gonna have to do something." God is saying, "I'm gonna have to do something." He doesn't say, "You're gonna have to do something. You're gonna have to do something to fix yourself. You've got a hard heart, you've got to figure out a way to make it soft." No. It's God saying, "You've got a hard heart and I'm gonna fix it. I'm gonna give you a new one."

So let me ask you just a reasonable question: if Jesus said, "Now here's the cup. My blood represents a new covenant." Notice, "My life, I'm gonna give you my life, I'm shed my blood to purchase the promises of this new covenant." If Jesus purchased the promise of the new covenant, then how do we get this new heart? Through faith in him. If Jesus' life, he laid down his life that this promise might be real and true for us, then we must look to him. We must look to Jesus. We must believe in him. We must receive him. We must, as Paul said, believe from the heart that Christ is the Son of God and that God raised him from the dead. We must look to Jesus. In other words, looking to Jesus, putting our hope in him will change everything.

There's a movie out, it's called "Gosnell: The Trial of America's Biggest Serial Killer," and this movie is fascinating in what's happening in people's hearts as they watch this. There is a young lady named Kathy Z., she's a student at the University of Central Florida, and a couple of weeks ago she promoted, she has 50,000 followers on Twitter and so she promoted the movie saying that she had a change of heart regarding abortion after watching this movie. Here's what she said, "Yesterday I was pro-choice. I believed that women should have a say and the government shouldn't be interfering with our lives, but today I'm pro-life." Now I bring that up simply because she looked at a movie. She watched a movie. She went in with one disposition and came out with a different one. She went in with one heart and came out with another.

What I'm saying to you this morning, friend, similar yet in a far more profound way, looking to Jesus and embracing him as the greatest treasure in the universe can give you a

new heart. When you look at Jesus, you see who he is, you see all of his claims, you see the fulfillment of those claims, you see him risen from the dead, you see him as the promised hope of the world, it will change your heart. You will not have the same heart. You'll have a new heart, and you see, here's the thing you need to pay attention to – now listen to me very carefully – when the good news of Jesus is proclaimed, today it's being proclaimed here, churches around this community, it's being proclaimed there, churches across America, being proclaimed there, churches across the world, being proclaimed there, even outside of churches in small groups and in homes where the Gospel is being proclaimed – listen – God is at work to remove the hardness of heart and to give a tender trusting heart which is the opposite of rebellion and self-reliance. In other words, when the Gospel is preached, the Spirit of God is at work then to change hearts and to walk away from that, to put up walls against that is a hardening of your heart. Understand that. God is not calling us to religion, he's calling us to Jesus and when the good news of Jesus is proclaimed, God's at work to change hearts, to give a new heart, a soft heart as opposed to a hard heart.

One last thing, in Romans 9 Paul refers to this hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Give me just a moment here, friends. I'll tell you what, this is a heavy subject, to think that a person can hear the Gospel, hear the Gospel of grace, hear the call to Jesus Christ and just keep resisting and keep resisting and keep resisting and keep resisting, hardening and keep hardening, and then God says, "Okay, go your own way." That's heavy stuff. Paul writes in Romans 9, "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.'" That's exactly what God said through Moses to Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, then notice what is added next, "So then he," that's God, "has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." You see, the Lord turned Pharaoh's evil, his hardening of his own heart into an occasion to assert his sovereign claim over the Israelites and to demonstrate his power to triumph over evil.

Dr. D. James Kennedy gave this very simple illustration that I want to leave you with this morning. He writes, "Here are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. They are friends of mine. I have found out about it and I plead with them, I beg them not to do it. Finally they push me out of the way and they start out. I tackle one of the men and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they are captured, convicted, sentenced to death. The one man who was not involved in the robbery goes free. Now I ask this question," here's what James Kennedy says, "Now I ask this question: whose fault was it that the other men died? Now this other man who was walking around free, can he say, can he say this, 'Because my heart is so good I am a free man'? The only reason that he is free is because of me, because I restrained him. So those who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves, those who go to heaven have no one to praise but Jesus Christ."

Friend, if you're here this morning and you say, "My goodness, I'm concerned about my soul. I'm concerned about my heart." He gives mercy to whom he will and what's that say to you? It should say this: if you need mercy, cry out to God for mercy. He shows mercy to those whom he will. Then cry out for mercy. That would be what I have to say to those

of you who, you know, you haven't committed your heart to Christ, you haven't come fully to Christ, I would say to you, call out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me! Have mercy on me! I don't want to perish! I don't want to live in this hardened state! Have mercy upon me!" He gives mercy. He gives mercy. He's rich in mercy. Cry out for mercy. He will hear you and he will rescue you and he will give you a soft heart that you might walk with him.