

Sermon 32, Practical Calvinism, Exodus 10:1-2

Proposition: God's heart-hardening sovereignty empowers and enables us to evangelize our neighbors.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, if you have ever wondered about what is commonly known as "Calvinism" — in the popular understanding, the belief that God is ultimately in charge of everything, and that whether a particular human person is saved or lost comes down to God's choice to save that person, or not — how Calvinism can possibly be reconciled with your lived experience of human freedom, this text is the text for you. Just as the Apostle Paul is both the most famous and driven evangelist in history, and also the Bible's boldest teacher of God's sovereignty, so in the two verses before us this morning God not only dares to indicate that Pharaoh's heart is completely in God's power, but also deploys that truth as motivation for Moses to go and reiterate God's demands to Pharaoh. Yes, you heard that right. What this passage dares to assert is that God's sovereignty over the human heart should motivate us to evangelize our neighbors. God's sovereignty over the human heart should motivate us to evangelize our neighbors.

I. Moses' Mission: "Go to Pharaoh," v. 1a

We see that immediately when we start reading this account of the 8th plague. The interplay between God's power and human freedom in this opening verse is absolutely fascinating. It has much to teach us. Notice, if you would, that God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the people. We get that. This is about the tenth time we've heard it in the text of Exodus. That is the basic demand. Yes, the full statement "Go to Pharaoh and say 'Let my people go' is not present here in v. 1. That's because the remainder of God's instructions are supposed to be inferred from what Moses actually announces to Pharaoh, down in vv. 3-6. There, it is clear that God said "Let my people go." So Moses is told to go to Pharaoh once again and demand the release of the people. That's unsurprising; that's what all these plagues are about.

II. Moses' Motivation: "I Have Hardened His Heart," v. 1b

But — the motivation Yahweh presents for this demand is anything but self-explanatory. Why should Moses go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the sons of Israel? Because God has hardened Pharaoh's heart, along with the heart of all of Egypt's bureaucrats!

Now, if Moses was a good broad-minded American Christian, how would he respond to a statement like this from the Almighty? He would say “Well, if you’re going to harden Pharaoh’s heart, there is no point in me going and telling him your demands. If you’re intervening to frustrate yourself, if you are helping your enemy do the thing you keep telling him not to do, then I can’t help you. I won’t go talk to Pharaoh unless you soften His heart. Come on, God.”

Isn’t that how we think? I have talked to many people, and read the books of many other people, who insist that God doesn’t know what He’s talking about in Exodus 10:1. They will admit that God has the right to harden Pharaoh’s heart. But they swear that it makes no sense for God to say “Moses, go demand that Pharaoh obey me *because* I have hardened his heart.” For these people — we can call them Arminians, but most of them would heartily resist that designation — God would not say this. He would only say, “Go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go, because I have softened his heart. He is more amenable to your demands than he used to be.”

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to examine your theology if this is sounding like a description of what you believe about God. You see, God doesn’t say “Go to Pharaoh because I’ve softened his heart.” He says “Go to Pharaoh because I’ve hardened His heart.” There is a big difference between those two statements. For many Christians, only the first statement makes sense. But I would urge those Christians to understand that their concept of God is too small, too limited, too much in their own image.

Universalism, with its insistence that God must and will save everyone at any price, is wrongheaded. God cares about saving sinners. But He cares about His glory, His name, and the discipleship of His people’s children just as much. That’s why He says “Go to Pharaoh because I’ve hardened his heart.” God’s goal in sending Moses to Pharaoh is not exclusively the salvation of Pharaoh and his officials. Nor is it exclusively to get Israel out of Egypt. God’s goal is way bigger than that. It’s way more complex than that. And it’s way more interesting than that. We think “If Moses is going to Pharaoh and saying ‘Let my people go,’ then getting the people out of Egypt must be his most important goal.” But let’s see how God explains Himself.

He does it this way: He tells Moses that the salvation of sinners and the deliverance of His people are not His only interest. He is merciful to sinners. For sure. But He is more than willing to give sinners over to their sins for the sake of one of His other purposes, such as the glory of His name and the discipleship of His people.

III. Yahweh’s Explanation, vv. 1-2

God knows that we don’t hear “I’ve hardened Pharaoh’s heart” as motivation to go tell Pharaoh that his heart ought to be softer. And so He explains to Moses what His other goals are. Notice that these goals are perfectly compatible with the goal of evangelizing sinners and delivering His people — but that they are not oriented toward evangelizing Pharaoh or delivering Israel with a minimum of difficulty and collateral damage. In this respect, of course, the plagues are exactly what we would expect from the God who created this world with all of its profusion of wonderful things that are not explicitly oriented toward anything beyond showing His glory and proclaiming His goodness. The rose does not bloom so that Narendra Modi will see it and

embrace Jesus. The rose would not be wasted even if Modi never repents of his Hindu folly. Rather, God wants to show the glory of His name — even to and through and upon the hard-hearted.

A. He Wanted to Perform Signs, v. 1c

So God's first explanation is that He wanted to perform signs among the Egyptians. He wanted to show — not to show off, as we would say, for that implies some degree of self-indulgence and pathetic spectacle — but to show Himself. Moses should go announce to Pharaoh that God demands that His people be let go because that way, when hard-hearted Pharaoh says no, God can put His character on display.

God's character, in other words, is not totally oriented around being kind to Pharaoh and winning him over to the right side. God is gracious to Pharaoh in many ways. But He is perfectly willing to use Pharaoh as a stage prop in a drama that is ultimately about God, not Pharaoh.

Yes, you heard that right. God is willing to use Pharaoh to display Himself.

Now, when one human being uses another, we call that narcissism. We regard it as pure evil. And so it is — because you are not the owner, lord, or master of another human being, and you may not usurp such a position over others. But imagine that you know someone who has taken the time to train performing fleas, and who unabashedly says “When you see these fleas jump at my command, you will know that I am a tremendously capable trainer of fleas!”

Would you look at that and say, “That's morally wrong. Those fleas are every bit the equal of that trainer”? Of course you wouldn't! You know that a human being is far superior to fleas, and that if a man wants to capture some insects and use them as props for his drama, he is perfectly within his rights to do so. But here's the part we tend to forget: As superior as you are to a flea, God is infinitely more superior than that to you. Let's call the distance between you and a flea six miles. The distance between you and God is six trillion miles. “You may be at the bottom of the deepest mine and I may stand on the highest mountain, but I am no more able to touch the stars than you.” My pastor used that quote regularly to indicate the extreme distance between God and us. And it's true.

Yahweh was going to perform signs in Egypt. There would have been no need for signs if Pharaoh had said “OK. Go ahead and leave. Thanks for your 430 years in Egypt; we appreciate it. We will send you some foreign aid when you get settled in Canaan, but we won't ask you to be a client kingdom or a vassal state.”

Well, if Pharaoh had said that, what need for the rod to turn into a serpent? What need for ten plagues, for the Red Sea crossing? But because of Pharaoh's intransigence, God got to display His character as the one who stands against evil, as the one who is with His people in their sufferings, as the one who delivers despite the fierce opposition of Hell. As we'll see in a couple of weeks, He also and climactically displayed Himself as the one who delivers through the death of the firstborn. In other words, God's signs did not exist for the sake of spectacle and entertainment. God did not harden Pharaoh's heart for the sake of hardening Pharaoh's heart, or in order to hurt His people more, or in order to make things harder for Moses. God hardened Pharaoh's heart because doing so allowed Him to reveal more of His character.

That's why the reality that God hardens hearts and makes sinners resolute in their sin is a motivation for evangelism. The good news is not that God will do anything to save a soul. The good news is that God hates evil, but also empowers evil so that He can conquer it with greater power. That's why we tell people "Come to God's side." We tell them that because they can't fight Him without His help anyway! We tell them "Obey God" because they need His help to obey Him and they need His help to disobey Him. They are totally dependent on Him, even in their evil. Therefore, they need to repent of their sin and turn to Him in utter dependence. God wanted to perform signs, so He strengthened Pharaoh's heart.

B. He Wanted His People to Teach their Children His Deeds, v. 2a-b

But the second reason God told Moses to go demand the people's release, even though God had hardened Pharaoh's heart, was that He wanted His people to teach their children about what He did in Egypt. In other words, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was not primarily directed toward Pharaoh's salvation. One of its major purposes was to be an object lesson for children.

How can God use a man like that? How does the Almighty dare to say "Oh, this will be instructive for the children. Let me cover Egypt with frogs. Let me fill the Nile with blood." The answer is that God cares about children knowing Him. Kids love cool and amazing things that go well beyond the bounds of normalcy. So does God. That's why He created sea lions and toucans and spiders and all kinds of other crazy creatures. That's why He makes hurricanes and supernovas and uranium. And that's why He raised up Pharaoh and strengthened him to be a stubborn, unrepentant slaveholder.

Do you teach your children about God? The whole story? Not just that He is kind and merciful, the God of kittens and bunnies and cuteness of every description, but also that He is the God of wolves and tigers? Do you read them "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," and emphasize that though William Blake was wrong about many things, yes indeed, the same one who made the Lamb also made the Tyger. Brothers and sisters, can I just put it this way? God is not nice.

Jesus was frequently rude! He was not particularly concerned with people's feelings. He is not a therapeutic deity. And neither is His Father. Stories of how God hardens the heart of tyrants and slaveowners and ruins their country are the kind of thing you need to be raising your children on. This is what Moses could market as "Chicken Soup for the Enslaved Hebrew's Soul." The preface would say something like, "Don't worry, my Israelite brother. You are enslaved right now just so that God can get glory over Pharaoh by fighting with him about your destiny. Meanwhile, yes, you have to make bricks without straw, own nothing, get lashed by the slave driver every day, and have your sons murdered. But God is doing it all for the most important thing in the world: His own glory."

Brothers and sisters, if you can't believe that, then you can't be a Christian. Let me say that again: If you think that God's main goal is your psychological well-being, or that He is mostly about your comfort and complacency and convenience, you are going to apostatize any day now. That's because the hard stuff of life is going to come your way. What if the church loses its tax exemption? What if Christians go to the Gulag? What if we no longer get any meat, but all have to become vegetarians because of ruinous climate policies? What if cars are banned,

leaving us all stuck in Gillette? Or, think of smaller disasters: Your child dies. Your identity is stolen. Your home is foreclosed on. Your spouse has an affair and leaves you.

What will you do then? Will you still trust the God who let that terrible thing happen to you, and maybe to your whole country? Will you say “God stood against Pharaoh while His people were enslaved for centuries. Therefore, I know that God is working for my eternal good in this disaster too, even though I can’t possibly see how”? Will you confess that the Lord is good even when you can’t see it? Will you trust that the God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order to do signs and discipline children is the God who is still letting tyrants tyrannize over His church?

If you insist that God couldn’t have said “Moses, go to Pharaoh because I have hardened his heart,” then you are equally going to insist that the bad things in your life must be outside of God’s control because He wouldn’t do such things. But if they are outside His control, then whose control are they in? No one’s? If that’s the case, then chance is stronger than God. Fate trumps Yahweh. Do you really want to go down that road?

God wanted His people not only to tell their children stories of the villains He conquered and the tyrants He bloodied, but also to believe those stories for themselves. In fact, He wanted His people to squarely face the reality that He is not Generic Deity™. He is not the God you imagine for yourself who is mostly concerned with therapeutic niceness. He is the God who plagued Egypt and punished Pharaoh.

C. He Wanted His People to Know that He Is Yahweh, v. 2c

The question remains: How can God give Pharaoh the strength he needs to do evil, while simultaneously and only remaining committed to the good? Wouldn’t a good God never give anyone the strength to do evil? But such a question misunderstands the nature of how God strengthens. God doesn’t tell people to do evil, even though He gives them the energy and tools they need. To say “A good God would never give anyone the power to do evil” is like saying “The electric utility would never sell power to someone who was using it to run a torture chamber” or “God would never let the dirt support someone who was walking across it for the purpose of killing someone.” God has chosen to give us the freedom to stand against Him. He even punishes our sin with more sin, responds to our heart-hardening by strengthening our hearts’ resolve so that we can plunge into evil with even more gusto and commitment. Why? Because He is Yahweh. That is what He wanted His people to learn from the plagues. That is, He wanted to upgrade their picture of God. He wanted them to know that He is the one who allows, ordains, and even in a certain sense empowers evil to run rampant and do its evil thing. Yet Moses doesn’t hear the command and say “So why bother? Why should I go?” Moses cooperates in order to show God’s power. Sometimes the purpose of evangelism is to display God’s power in standing against the evil people who won’t listen to Him. Sometimes we have to tell people to shape up not for the purpose of getting them to shape up, but for the purpose of glorifying God in some other way.

Do you know Yahweh? Do you know Him as the one who raised up Pharaoh in order to show His power? Who hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order to punish him for his stubbornness?

Who sent Moses to say “Let my people go” even though His real intention was to continue to use Pharaoh as a prop to reveal His mighty and perfect character? Brothers and sisters, the whole point of Exodus is the knowledge of God. This little command to Moses — “Go to Pharaoh, because I’ve hardened his heart” — shows us who our God is. He is awesome, fearsome, and terrifying. Trust Him. And in the strength of His power against evil, tell your neighbors that they need to obey Him or, like Pharaoh, they will be destroyed. Amen.