

A Heart of Stone

Thinking Properly about the Hardening of Pharaoh

- ¹⁸ Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."
- ¹⁹ And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead."
- ²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.
- ²¹ 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."
- ³¹ And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped. (Exo 4:31 ESV) (Exo 4:18-21 ESV)

Exodus 4:18-21, 31

The gospel came to Moses as he stood near the burning bush on the side of Mt. Horeb. Christ told him, "I am the God of your father [Amram]." "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." "I have seen the affliction of my people." "I am going to deliver them from their oppressor." "I will bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey." "I will be with you, Moses."

The gospel won over Moses' heart, and now Moses is willing to following the LORD. Thus, he makes his way off the mountain back to his *father-in-law* and to his wife Zipporah—daughter of Jethro—with a new purpose in life. He is to be God's ambassador in Egypt. Moses has been employed by Jethro for forty years and so he asks his father this question, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive" (Ex 4:18).¹ When Moses returns and finally

¹ In this, the comparison with Jacob (which I spoke about a great deal in the first two chapters) continues. You will remember that Jacob at one point in time asked Laban, *his* father-in-law, who gave him his daughter in

confronts Pharaoh, he and Aaron ask him, “Please let us go a three day’s journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God” (5:2). The LORD has said, “Let my people go, that they may hold a feast² to me in the wilderness (Ex 5:1).

Now, you must remember that in returning to Egypt, Moses was in a sense, returning home. He had been raised in Pharaoh’s house. The Pharaoh who sought to kill him would have been regarded as his *adopted father*.³ But this Pharaoh is now dead (2:15, 23), and the LORD told Moses about this while still in Midian (4:19), so that he would not be afraid to speak to the new Pharaoh.

These circumstances provide biographical background to a literary relationship between Moses’ question to Jethro and his question to Pharaoh. There is an obvious parallel that begs for us to inquire more. When Moses asks Jethro, “Please let me go,” Jethro responds, “Go in peace.” And it says Moses “took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt” (4:20).⁴ But when Moses asks Pharaoh, “Please let us go,” the king replies, “Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.”⁵

Why does Pharaoh respond this way? This is the question I will seek to answer today. I want to deal in the rest of this sermon with what has become a very controversial topic in the church: **The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart**. Since the days of the Reformation, the question of the hardening of Pharaoh has been a battlefield. The Roman Catholic Church, as defended by the great humanist **Erasmus** claimed that Pharaoh first hardened his heart freely apart from divine influence.⁶ **Martin Luther**⁷ defended the old Augustinian⁸ view that God is the ultimate cause of the

marriage, and who has been employing him, “Send me away, that I may go to my own home country” (Gen 30:25).

² Foreshadowing the Feast that Aaron holds on Sinai?

³ This gives Moses three earthly fathers: Amram, Jethro, and Pharaoh. Use this as a springboard for next week’s sermon on the “firstborn son” and God as Father. Also, Lord’s Prayer.

⁴ Again the Jacob-Laban narrative comes into highlight. Jacob had asked Laban, “Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go” (Gen 30:26).

⁵ One wonders if Pharaoh’s response is related literarily to Laban’s, who refused to let Jacob go because the LORD had blessed him so greatly while Jacob was with him (cf. Gen 30:27ff).

⁶ Greg Beale, “An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9,” *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984), p. 129.

⁷ See especially **Martin Luther**, *Bondage of the Will*: Sections 73-74.

⁸ Cf., **Augustine**, *A Treatise on Grace and Freewill*, ch. 41.

hardening of Pharaoh. **John Calvin**,⁹ **John Knox**,¹⁰ **Ulrich Zwingli**¹¹ and all the great first generation Protestants agreed with Luther. It was only until many decades later that Protestants like Jacob Arminius began to retreat to the old Roman position.¹² My point here is simply to note that the conclusion I will come to in this sermon is the one heralded by all the original Protestants of the Reformation.

The point in question here **the relationship between God's sovereignty and human free-agency**. Even though we all come to the Scripture biased, with presuppositions that color our every reading, it is important to try and be as exegetically grounded to the text on this question as possible. It is not only the relationship between Moses' questions to Jethro and Pharaoh that have caused me to look in more depth at this topic today. It is **Exodus 4:21**. This verse gives us one more angle from which to understand the calling of Moses. God sent Moses to Egypt for this purpose: **"When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your hand."** Moses had been given **three signs** by God: The rod turns into a snake, the hand becomes leprous, the Nile becomes like blood. The rod was a significant part of Moses' ministry, and it will be used time and again throughout Moses' life. Thus, **vs. 20** mentions **"Moses took the staff of God in his hand."**¹³

⁹ **Calvin** for instance writes, "But there are other passages which go farther, such as those concerning the hardening of Pharaoh: "I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go." The same thing is afterwards repeated in stronger terms. Did he harden his heart by not softening it? This is, indeed, true; but he did something more: he gave it in charge to Satan to confirm him in his obstinacy. Hence he had previously said, "I am sure he will not let you go." The people come out of Egypt, and the inhabitants of a hostile region come forth against them. How were they instigated? Moses certainly declares of Sihon, that it was the Lord who "had hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate," (Deut. 2:30). The Psalmists relating the same history says, "He turned their hearts to hate his people," (Psalm 105:25). You cannot now say that they stumbled merely because they were deprived of divine counsel. For if they are *hardened* and *turned*, they are purposely bent to the very end in view." Calvin, *Institutes* 2.4.4.

¹⁰ Cf. **John Knox**, *On Predestination*, Section 38

¹¹ Cf. **Ulrich Zwingli** in Raget Christoffel, J. Cochran, Zwingli, *The Rise of the Reformation in Switzerland* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, MDCCCLVIII), 394.

¹² One can find it earlier in the works of Sebastian Castellio (b. 1515), but this is an isolated view.

¹³ "In this power" (ESV, NAS) is a terrible translation that does not do justice to the repetition of yad (hand) from vs. 20. The point is that God gave Moses this "power" through the staff of God that he takes in his hand. How special was this staff? We believe it was an ordinary staff that Moses had made while in Jethro's house. But God used it as the very symbol of his sovereign power. However, some Jews—especially those prone to fantastical symbolism and mystical interpretations believed it was the very staff that God had made for Adam in the Garden of Eden. For example, *Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer 40* says, "Created at twilight, before the Sabbath, it was given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam gave it to Enoch, who gave it to Methuselah; he in turn passed it on to Noah. Noah bequeathed it to his son Shem, who transmitted it to Abraham. From Abraham to Isaac, and then to Jacob, who took it with him to Egypt. Jacob gave it to Joseph; upon Joseph's death all his possessions were removed to Pharaoh's palace. Jethro, one of Pharaoh's advisors desired it, whereupon he took

But in order for Moses to perform all of these miracles with his staff in front of the Pharaoh, **God must ensure that the Pharaoh will not listen** to any of the first miracles that Moses' enacts. God is really going to be doing the opposite to Pharaoh that he did to Moses. Moses continued to be reluctant to the call of God, and so the gospel had to win him over. But the LORD never sends the king of Egypt good news. He never promises to be with him, to be his God, to help and support him.

Instead what we read in **4:21** is this: **"I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."** What I want to do in light of this verse is look at the **21 instances** in Exodus which deal either directly or indirectly with this statement. In forming my conclusions, I always want to keep in mind the **redemptive-historical situation** in which we find the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. It is important not to simply theologize about these things, otherwise, as **Calvin** would say, we will find ourselves entering into a labyrinth of speculations from which there is no escape.¹⁴ But when we keep ourselves secured to the text, and rooted in redemption, we find that the things about this subject that are revealed to us are understandable and beneficial for our growth and maturity in Christ, for we are part of this same redemptive story that took place all those years ago.

To "Harden"

it and stuck it in the ground in his garden in Midian. From then on no one could pull out the staff until Moses came. He read the Hebrew letters on the staff, and pulled it out readily. Knowing then that Moses was the redeemer of Israel, Jethro gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage. Then, as a shepherd to Jethro, it was while investigating the phenomenon of the Burning Bush, that the LORD said to Moses, 'What is that in your hand?' and Moses said, 'A Staff.'" In other legends it is called a "tree" in Jethro's garden (from the Sefer Ha-Aggada, or Legends of the Mishna). It weighted 40 seahs (the same amount of water used in a Jewish Mikveh) and was made of pure sapphire (Midrash Rabbah – Exodus 8:3).

¹⁴ For example, "The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended with considerable difficulty is rendered very perplexed and hence perilous by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths and climbing to the clouds determined if it can that none of the secret things of God shall remain unexplored. When we see many, some of them in other respects not bad men, every where rushing into this audacity and wickedness, it is necessary to remind them of the course of duty in this matter. First, then, when they inquire into predestination, let them remember that they are penetrating into the recesses of the divine wisdom, where he who rushes forward securely and confidently, instead of satisfying his curiosity will enter in inextricable labyrinth. For it is not right that man should with impunity pry into things which the Lord has been pleased to conceal within himself, and scan that sublime eternal wisdom which it is his pleasure that we should not apprehend but adore, that therein also his perfections may appear. Those secrets of his will, which he has seen it meet to manifest, are revealed in his word—revealed in so far as he knew to be conducive to our interest and welfare" (*Institutes* 3.21.1).

The first thing to look at is how God says he will “harden” Pharaoh. It is interesting that where English translations use one word, there are actually **three words** used in the Hebrew (see **handout**). The first word (the one used in **4:21** and most other instances)¹⁵ is *chazaq*. It means “to be strong,” as in **Ex 12:33** where the Egyptians “forced” (“urged”) the people to leave and sent them out of the land in haste, for fear that everyone in Egypt would be killed by the LORD after the plague of the firstborn; or in **Joshua 11:12** where the LORD gave the Canaanites a “strong desire” to fight and to carry out a military campaign against Israel.¹⁶ Thus, the idea is that the LORD will give the Pharaoh a strong desire, thus effectually urging him to not listen to Moses.

The next word is *kabed*. It means to “be heavy” as in **Ex 9:18**, “Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy (*grievous*) hail to fall.” The idea is that the LORD will intensify Pharaoh’s already bitter disposition towards Israel, so that he absolutely will not let the people go. In fact, “letting the people go” is the explanation always given for why God is said to *kabed* the heart of Pharaoh.

The last word is *qashah*. It means to “be difficult, hard, or severe” as in **Exodus 6:9**, “Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and *harsh slavery*.” The word only occurs in our verses in **Exodus 7:3** where it means that the LORD will make Pharaoh’s heart stubborn so that he may multiply this signs and wonders in Egypt.

Seeing these three different Hebrew words is helpful, because it demonstrates that while God is hardening Pharaoh each time, he is doing it in **different ways**, sometimes strongly forcing the king’s heart to go against Moses, sometimes intensifying the already hardened attitude, and sometimes making his will so stubborn that coming to a decision to release Israel can never possibly be reached.

The “Will”

¹⁵ Of the other hardening of Pharaoh’s heart references the word occurs in: 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19; 9:12, 9:35; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17.

¹⁶ I will be referring repeatedly to Greg Beal’s helpful article, “An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9,” *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984), 129-154. Unless otherwise referenced, this is the source of my information.

In saying these things about what God does to Pharaoh, a word about the “will” needs to be made. As we will see, what we call the “will,” the Egyptians referred to as the “heart.” A lot of people think that the will is this neutral force that calmly, objectively, scientifically, methodically decides to act one way or another. It is perfectly unbiased towards any choice until it actually makes the choice. Thus, it is often thought that the will is capable of choosing the opposite way from what it does. That is, it is absolutely [free or sovereign](#) over its decisions.

Philosophers sometimes refer to this as [Indeterminism](#) or [Incompatibilism](#). Generally speaking, this is the idea that Divine Sovereignty and/or Divine foreknowledge are incompatible with “freewill.” God does not determine our choices, or at least not apart from first looking down the corridors of time to see what we will choose (a concept I have never understood). Though people call it “predestination” to look into the future to see what we will do and then make a choice accordingly, I believe as our beloved church Deacon says, this is more properly called *post-destination* based upon *pre-observation*.

Yet, the will is not this neutral, unbiased, machine. Rather, the will chooses what it does based upon previously existing desires, affections, and biases. We are not computers or robots, built simply to process data apart from emotion and passion. This is why God refers to it as Pharaoh’s *heart*. And the heart of a man is *already* deceitful and desperately wicked from birth. It is to the king’s heart that I want to turn next. For 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.”

Egyptian Background of the Heart

God says he will harden Pharaoh’s *heart*. There is some very important background from Egypt that I have come to believe is quite important. For while we do see from time to time God hardening others in the Scripture (i.e. Sihon and the Anakim [[Deut 2:30](#); [Josh 11:20](#)] or Israel [[Isaiah 63:17](#)]), there is no *real* comparison to the Pharaoh who is said to be hardened no less than 18 times in 10 chapters! [There is a good reason for this emphasis on Pharaoh’s heart.](#)

The Egyptians called the heart the *ib*. This was separate from the “soul, spirit, or body” all of which they called the *ba*.¹⁷ According to John Currid, the *ib* was the inner spiritual center of the self, the most important part of the human. It was so important that upon death, Anubis—the mortuary god—calls for the heart of the king to be weighed against the “feather of truth and righteousness.” If the heart is too heavy (i.e. is a witness against him), he would be cast to Amemit, a part crocodile, part lion, part hippopotamus god that waits to eat whoever is cast to him. This was a kind of works-righteousness.

Amulets were used to protect the heart. If you have watched the remake of *The Mummy* (Brenden Frasier), you know that the scarab is a disgusting little creature (called a dung-beetle, because it rolls its dung around) used to create lots of heart-pounding scares in the movie. As the movie properly depicts, this dung-beetle was used as a seal or charm. It has been found by the thousands in excavations of Egyptian tombs. They would place a scarab-idol on a base made in the shape of a human heart, and wrap it up with the mummy near its pectorals as a means of helping the person do well in the afterlife. The heart-charm protected heart of the dead person, which in the early days was often the only part of the mummy not removed in the mummification process. Later on, however, they developed this idea that the heart told harmful tales of the deceased at the last judgment, and so they would remove it and place it in a jar beside the mummy! Yet, they would still place the dung beetle as a charm on the body to protect the person after death.

Very importantly, Greg Beale adds to this discussion that the heart was viewed as the “seat of destiny,” for determining one’s life. The autonomy of the heart came to be called a “second being of man, next to and outside of him” and more importantly, “the heart of a man is his God himself.” The heart was seen as a divine instrument through which a god directed a man. It was the divine organ that received divine commands.¹⁸ Pharaoh’s heart in particular was said to be the “all-controlling factor both in history and society.”¹⁹ As an incarnation of the gods Re and Horus, Pharaoh’s heart was thought to be sovereign over creation.²⁰

¹⁷ The following discussion is from John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the OT*, p. 96-103.

¹⁸ Beale, p. 133.

¹⁹ P. 149.

²⁰ Currid, p. 102.

I hope you are seeing the point! To the Egyptian, the heart was everything! Indeed, the heart of the Pharaoh was sovereign over everything. Closely tied to this is the very contemporary idea (that we attach to the will) that the heart was autonomous, free, and sovereign over all. When read in this light, the things that Exodus tells us about God hardening the heart of *Pharaoh* become very powerful indeed.

One can say that God performed the entire exodus of Israel in the way that he did it in order to attack these pagans who had exchanged the truth about God for a lie. It was a lie that was now spreading around the globe, because Egypt was the most powerful force in all the world. God himself tells Pharaoh, “*I raised you up for this very purpose, to show you my power, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout all the earth*” (Ex 9:16). The LORD has had enough of this so-called *autonomous* free-agent blaspheming God’s name and exalting himself over everything. This is the context into which you must understand the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

Text

1) It is important now to look at the passages that talk about this *in the order* they have been received by God. The order actually helps us understand the meaning. Ex 3:19-20 says, “*I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.*” This is the first verse that relates to the topic. It says that God “*knows*”²¹ that the king will not let the people go, *before* Moses even leaves the slopes of Mt. Sinai. Obviously, God knows the future exhaustively. *But what is it that God knows specifically?*

²¹ Beale has an important footnote on “to know” (*yada*). He summarizes what is today universally accepted. “Space does not allow for a word study of *yada*, but most scholars admit the word has a much stronger sense than our Western concept of foreknowledge. It is generally agreed that it revolves around the nuance “to be actively-experientially involved in a relationship” (cf. the standard Old Testament theologies, e.g., Vriezen, Jacob, Eichrodt, Pedersen, etc.). It is well known that this applies to covenant relations, but it may also refer to non-covenantal, judgmental relations (Jer 16:21; Ezek 25:14; Ps 106:8). When used of Yahweh the emphasis is upon his “knowing” which “establishes the significance of what is known.” (R. Bultmann, : The OT Usage [of *Yāda:*], *TDNT*. 1.698; cf. further Exod 33:12; Gen 18:19; 2 Sam 7:20; Ps 1:6; 144:3; Jer 1:5; Hos 13:5; Amos 3:2). “To know anything is to have power over it” (Jacob, *Theology* 284). The parallel could be drawn that just as Yahweh used Abraham in his *Heilsgeschichteplan* to fulfill a purpose (Gen 18:19), so he did with Pharaoh.” (Beale, n. 37, p. 236).

2) **Exodus 4:21** is the first instance of the actual hardening given in the Scripture. It answers the question about what God knows. We have already seen it today. It says, “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.*” It is critical to see here that **the very first thing that is said about Pharaoh’s heart is that God will harden it.** Not Pharaoh. God. This is what God knows! He knows that he will harden Pharaoh’s heart. As one commentator says, Yahweh is the sole subject “**busying Himself eagerly**” in the action.²²

Yet, importantly, **it tells us why**, and I have already mentioned this today. We are not left to speculate and guess about God’s purposes in this. It is **so that Moses will be able to perform all of the miracles that God wants to show the Egyptians.** This means that the time-frame in mind here is **everything up until the last plague is to be finished.** Thus, **4:21** is an encapsulating statement. So that God will ensure that everything will be performed, he will become strong against the heart of the king, even when all reason and passion tells us that Pharaoh should just give in. In fact, it is probable that if God does not intervene in this way, Pharaoh would have let the people go, for he hints that he wants to do this several times before he finally drives them away (**Ex 8:8, 25, 28; 9:28; 10:8, 11, 24**). But each time, his heart is hardened. In this, God gets all the glory. The hardening is done for the glory of God!

3) The third passage is **Exodus 5:2**. It is the only other passage that does not explicitly talk about hardening. In it the king simply says, “**I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.**” I want to note two things. First, we need to remember that **the main context of the hardening** is so that “**he will not let you go**” (cf. **4:21**). Here, the Pharaoh is doing exactly what God predicted. Second, you need to understand that in any event, there are always **two agents**. God is the primary agent. Humans are the secondary agents. Or to put it another way, God is the efficient cause. Humans are the immediate or instrumental cause (see handout). Both are real agents. Both are real causes.

You see this throughout Scripture. Joseph says to his brothers, “**As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good**” (**Gen 50:20**). Isaiah calls Assyria the “rod” of God’s anger (**Isa 10:5**). Even here we see this. **Exodus 5:22** says, “O

²² Beale, 134.

Lord, why have you done evil to this people?” Yet, in the very next verse, it says “[Pharaoh] has done evil to this people” (5:23). Two agents, one event. So, in light of verses that we will soon come to, as we begin to address the question of who did the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, we already see that there is no contradiction between saying that both did it. But if you want to understand this properly, you must keep the correct order. God hardens the king’s heart as the efficient, ultimate, first cause. And this is the point that people usually don’t like to admit.

4) Ex 7:3-4 repeats the prediction of 4:21, “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.” God obviously says this for the sake of Moses, who surely would and absolutely did get quite angry at the obstinence of the king. In fact, in Ex 11:8-9 this is exactly what we find. Moses goes out from Pharaoh “in hot anger,” and the LORD says, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.” God was reminding Moses to calm down. Things are going exactly according to plan.

5) Ex 7:13 says, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.” This verse, and five others after it add the critical reminder “as the LORD had said.” It says that Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, but it does not say by whom. Whether God did it or Pharaoh did it is not really a big deal (both are explicit agents of hardening at one time or another). The point of the reminder is that whenever the Pharaoh’s heart becomes hard, it is because this was what God had told Moses would happen, because God would be actively involved in hardening it. “As the LORD has said” is a formula used nearly 200 times in the Pentateuch, 150 of which involve this prophecy-fulfillment motif.²³ That is surely how it is being used here.

6) Exodus 7:14 says, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.’” This is the first use of the word *kabed*. The idea is that Pharaoh’s heart has been made so “heavy” that even the signs that were being performed would not be able to move it properly.

²³ See Beale, p. 140.

7) **Exodus 7:22**, “So Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.” This verse does not add anything new to the discussion.

8) **Exodus 8:15** says, “When Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them.” This is an important verse in the whole discussion, because this verse prevents us from going to a **hyper-Calvinist** view that human beings have no true volition, as some people I know actually believe. We do have a will. The Bible says we do. Reason and common sense make it obvious. We are responsible creatures because the things we do **we do because we want to do them**. Yet, you must remember that what you want to do is not governed by the will, but by the mind, the affections, the desires, and even circumstances around you, so that your will never chooses neutrally. The will is simply that which acts based upon what it perceives at the time is the greatest desire.²⁴

You must understand, there is a difference between an **Arminian conception** of the will (what we might call “Freewill”) and a **Reformed view** of the will (what we might call “free-agency”). We might both use the word “freewill,” but we mean different things by it. The Arminian supposes that the will acts neutrally, and if it didn’t, our wills would not be truly free. However, Reformation Christians do not think that even God has that kind of a will. We suppose that a will chooses freely if that is what it *wants* to do. It doesn’t matter if other influences contribute to guide our wills in a particular direction. A free-agent does what he wants. Why he wants what he wants is a completely different question.

But **here is the rub** concerning our topic. Even when Pharaoh hardens his own heart, this is in exact accordance with the plan whereby *God* would harden his heart. Perhaps that is why God chose to tell us only **three times** that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but **ten** times that God did. Our natural tendency is not to deny human responsibility, but God’s sovereignty over our wills! That is why even my own children have to keep being told that God predestines things. They don’t naturally believe it!

²⁴ See **Jonathan Edwards**, *The Freedom of the Will*. A helpful summary of this can be found in **James M. Boice**, “Sermon 35: The Bondage of the Will,” Romans: Volume 1, p. 300-302.

So, **Pharaoh never acts autonomously** against God's sovereign action in his life. Such a thought is unthinkable theologically, exegetically, historic-redemptively, and culturally. Remember, God's hardening is done in order to show Pharaoh exactly this: that he is *not* autonomous, not a god, not the all-controlling factor in history, not sovereign over creation, not the seat of destiny. If Pharaoh were to somehow harden his heart apart from the decree, the prophecy, and the mighty hand of God, then Pharaoh would be *confirmed* in his belief in all of these things, and his hardening of his own heart would ironically defeat God's displaying his glory through him through God's control over the Pharaoh. People just have not thought through the implications of their beliefs well enough.

Before I leave this, I want to read **Calvin**. Listen to the Father of the Reformed Faith, "Some evade these forms of expression [i.e. that God hardened Pharaoh's heart] by a silly cavil, because Pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart, thus making *his* will the cause of hardening it; as if the two things did not perfectly agree with each other, though in different senses—viz. that man, though acted upon by God, at the same time also acts. But I retort the objection on those who make it. If to harden means only bare permission, the rebellion will not properly belong to Pharaoh. Now, could anything be more feeble and insipid than to interpret as if Pharaoh had only allowed himself to be hardened? We may add, that Scripture cuts off all handle for such cavils: "I," saith the Lord, "will harden his heart" (Exod. 4:21). Calvin, *Institutes* 1.18.2.

9) **Exodus 8:19**, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said." This verse adds nothing new to our discussion.

10) **Exodus 8:32**, "Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go." Again, I have already said everything I can about this.

11) **Exodus 9:7**, "But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go." I am going to keep reading all of these verses, just to impress upon you that this is a major theme of the Exodus narrative. It is something God *wants* you to be thinking about. Otherwise, he wouldn't keep repeating himself.

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

idea “as the LORD had spoken to Moses.” Everything here goes back to **Exodus 4:21**, our first verse today.

13) Exodus 9:34, “He sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants.” This verse finally adds something new. It says that **Pharaoh sinned**. When you act of our own volition in a way such as this: to not listen to God, to not obey God, to not listen to his word or his servants that send it, then it is a sin. You are not to excuse yourself by saying, “**But God predestined me to do it.**” You are not to say, “**But God is the one who hardened my heart.**”

Rather, as Calvin has said, both things are in agreement. God does it. You do it. However, God does it with a heart of pure goodness, with no evil intent in his heart, for God is not capable of doing evil. Your intention is exactly the opposite. Even if we say that the hardening ultimately lead to Pharaoh’s death in the Sea and subsequent doom in hell (which it did), it is not evil on God’s part for this reason. **Pharaoh was not some God-seeking, good hearted acolyte that God turned away and destroyed.** This man was already wicked to the core and born in original sin. 2000 years ago **Philo** said it well, “**The Monarch from the cradle had his soul filled with all the arrogance of his ancestors**” (Philo, *Moses* 1.88). This is the state of all of us. We were born enemies of God, under wrath, and dead in our sins. There is not one of you here today that can say anything different. It is not proper to say that hardening is not fair, because fairness relates to justice, not grace.

Justice is that Pharaoh and everyone else on earth be sent to hell for their treason against such a Holy God. Don’t ask God to be fair! You do not know what you are asking for. What is fair is that God destroy Moses on the side of Sinai for his insolence and impertinence for rejecting God’s call. Yet, God showed Moses grace, gave him the gospel, and saved him, because it pleased God in the freedom of *his* will to do it!

And what is that gospel that saves you? That Jesus Christ got what was *unfair*, a death-sentence that you deserve, paying the punishment of your sin on the cross, becoming a very curse according to the law, so that you might not have to suffer the dark hot-licking flames of hell. All there is to “do” is believe such a thing by faith, and **God will in turn be unfair to you** for the sake of Christ (this unfairness is called “grace”) and will impute to you the righteousness of Christ that he earned while on

earth obeying his Father in all things as the second Adam. **Will you believe that?** Will you believe in the unfairness of this good news to save a sinner like you deserving hell? If so, then *rest* in such a thing. Rejoice in such a thing. Be wholly comforted. Because this is happily the most unfair thing that God has ever done! And why has he done it? Actually, continuing to look at our verses will answer that question.

14) **Exodus 9:35**, “So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go, just at the LORD had spoken.” This verse does not answer it, but the next does.

15) **Exodus 10:1-2**, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants.” These verses then add the following **four very important points**. First, God hardens his heart “**that I may show these signs of mine among them.**” We have seen this before. It is God desiring to show Egypt who is really in control of the elements. God also saves for this same reason.

Second, “**That you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson.**” That is, that the word of God may spread from generation to generation, even as it has done to this day all because God did harden this man’s heart and did perform those miracles. Think about what the world would be like if none of this ever happened. I dare say this was the most important thing ever to happen after the flood until Jesus himself came to earth.

Third, tell your children “**how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians.**” This is not a God to be trifled with. Yet, it is a God who severely punishes those who persecute his chosen people. All of this was founded upon that first chapter of Exodus where Moses’ adopted father Pharaoh began to treat the chosen people very, very harshly. How God is returning the favor. God does not overlook the blood and tears of the saints! As we will see, the Israelites viewed this as tremendously good news.

Fourth, “**That you may know that I am the LORD.**” **How wonderful is that?** Here is perhaps the ultimate redemptive-historical point of the hardening of Pharaoh. It is so that *you* may know the LORD! These things were not written for them alone, but also for you! It is so you may have fellowship with him, forgiveness from him, peace with him. The hardening of Pharaoh is not given to be a divisive doctrine in

the church, but a precious pearl of Christian comfort, knowing that God will stop at no lengths to ensure that he is known and worshipped by his people.

16) **Exodus 10:20**, “But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.”

17) **Exodus 10:27**, “The LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let them go.”

18) **Exodus 11:10**, “The LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.”

19) **Exodus 14:4** says, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.” This is an important verse for two reasons. First, it **introduces a second phase of hardening**. This time the hardening is with the result that Pharaoh would chase Israel after they have left Egypt. This in turn has another purpose. It is **so that the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD!**

In other words, the destruction of the Pharaoh was actually *for the benefit of the Egyptians*. Don’t think this knowledge for them is to be different than it was for Israel. It is the very same knowledge. They would know now that it is not Pharaoh who is god. It is the LORD who is God. As such, *they* might have faith in him now too. For he has made himself known to them! This is good news, if they would only see it as such. Many people do not see the good news as good at all, because they remain stubborn in their pride and arrogance. Yet, this does not change the facts: To be shown the power and might of God to redeem his people is gospel. This also fits the later plan of God that comes to pass in the coming of Christ. For the Prophets of Israel foresaw a day when the Egyptians would come to worship God, which seems to be foreshadowed even in the coming out of some of the Egyptians with Israel in the exodus.

20) **Exodus 14:8**, “The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly.

21) **Exodus 14:17**, “I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen.” This final verse tells us that God so hardened this man’s heart that he even went into the Sea to his own destruction. **God did it all so that he might get glory over the king of the earth.** For God is the king of heaven and earth, and in the exodus event, the world gets such a taste of it that it brings fear upon the nations that Israel will soon encounter in the wilderness and in the Promised Land.

To conclude this sermon I wish to look at **Exodus 4:31**. Though it includes a lot more than just this prophecy of the Pharaoh and his heart, it certainly does include this too. What happened when Moses returned to his people, spoke all the words that eth LORD has spoken, and did the signs in their sight? It says that “**the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.**”

Frankly, I think that too many of you have forgotten that this is the reason why we have been given the word of God. It is why you have been told about God hardening the Pharaoh’s heart. God tells you things so that you can understand them and **respond to them appropriately**. Perhaps these rebellious children of Israel have something to teach us then.

Perhaps you are one whose zeal ensures that you never take those words in the way that they are meant to be taken. You **parse and splice the meaning of words into oblivion**, so that you convince yourself that no one can ever know with certainty what they mean. My taking a side on this question bothers you, because you don’t think knowledge like this is possible. Perhaps you are one that hears them and so **gets angry at God** for what he has told you about himself. Maybe you have become someone that now gets **trapped into endless debates** with people we cannot convince otherwise. Maybe you are one who **loves to enter the labyrinths of speculation** about God’s decrees, and so you never come into the real world. Or maybe, just maybe, you just get fooled into thinking that such things **just don’t really matter** in the first place. You see this all as nothing but an intellectual game that you want no part of. It’s not that these things make you mad or excite your intellect. It’s that they don’t do anything for you at all! What a pitiable condition that is to be in. What a pitiable condition any of these are to be in.

For brothers and sisters, God gives tells you these things for one reason and one reason only: So that you might **bow your head**, **prostrate yourself** before a Being with such absolute power, and **worship him**. Will you worship him **for his plan?** Will you worship him **for his power?** Will you worship him for his desire and ability to **keep his promises?** Will you worship him for **upholding his justice?** Will you worship him for **imposing himself upon Pharaoh** so that his name might become known among the nations? Will you worship him, because through this, he has been able to **give you the gospel?**

Paul, who quotes this very idea of hardening Pharaoh's heart in his discussion on predestination, and concludes the way that we all should, in worship!

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"
"Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen.
(Rom 11:33-36)*