

Why Does God Harden Hearts?

Does God really harden hearts?

Fourteen times in Scripture a statement is made that God hardens someone's heart (15 if we count John 12:40 where the "He" may be read as a reference to God or perhaps to Isaiah -- see Isaiah 6:9-10). Nine of those times are in relation to Pharaoh. Outside of Pharaoh, God says that he will harden the hearts of the Egyptians (Exodus 14:17), that the LORD hardened the spirit of Sihon, king of Heshbon (Deuteronomy 2:30), that it was of the LORD to harden the hearts of the northern kings in Canaan (Joshua 11:20), the prophet Isaiah asks why God has hardened Israel's heart (Isaiah 63:17), and the apostle Paul states that whom God wills He hardens (Romans 9:18).

What do these passages mean?

The first time Scripture speaks of hardening someone's heart, it is in reference to Pharaoh. In Exodus 4:21, Scripture uses a verb meaning "to strengthen" when God states to Moses "I will cause Pharaoh's heart to be strengthened" [often translated "hardened"] (Exodus 4:21). This is the Piel form of the verb "to strengthen" which has the picture that this is the action of God to bring about a state of being strengthened without regard to the process by which this is done (*An Introduction to Hebrew Grammar*, Waltke, page 400). God would cause Pharaoh's heart to be strengthened. But God does not say how He will do it. This verb, form, and usage appear again in Exodus 14:4.

What is stated as a future statement in Exodus 4:21 becomes an accomplished statement in Exodus 7:13, with Scripture using the same verb and form of the verb as was found in Exodus 4:21. The LORD strengthened Pharaoh's heart. This verb and form also appear in Exodus 9:12; 10:20, 27, 11:10, and 14:8.

At the same time, we have statements that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Thus, in Exodus 8:32 we find that the statement that "Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also." This verse uses a different verb translated "hardened" which verb has the base meaning of "to make weighty or heavy." It is the verb that is associated with the noun "glory," a weighty rather than the light and airy idea we sometimes associate with the word. Pharaoh made his heart of stubborn substance. The "also" in 8:23 tells us that Pharaoh had done this before. There is a relationship between God hardening Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardening his own heart. Other passages speaking of Pharaoh hardening his own heart are Exodus 8:15 and 9:34.

In the midst of these various statements on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, Scripture gives us some clarification on this issue of who was responsible for Pharaoh's hard heart. In Exodus 7:3, God says that he will harden Pharaoh's heart. The Hebrew verb used here is a word meaning "to be hard." This is a Hiphel form of the Hebrew verb (see *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon*, pg. 904) with a basic meaning that God will cause the heart of Pharaoh to be hard. The Hiphil form of the Hebrew word

denotes the subject (God) acting and the object (Pharaoh) participating as a second subject in the action (An Introduction to Hebrew Grammar, Waltke, page 435). The object is joining with the action. In other words, Pharaoh joins God in the hardening process. Pharaoh may be seen as the agent by which God accomplishes His hardening action. Because the Hiphil states nothing about whether the object is a willing or an unwilling participant in the action, we are left to the context to determine whether the author of Exodus sees Pharaoh as joining willingly in the hardening.

Likewise, in Exodus 10:1, the LORD said to Moses: “Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants...” Here, Scripture uses the same word used in Exodus 8:15, 32, and 9:34. The form of the verb is also in the Hiphil form. Once again, God and Pharaoh are seen as participating in the hardening.

I make the following observations from these passages. First, the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh, as the hardening of the heart of Sihon, and of the northern kings of Canaan was in relation to their dealings with Israel. It is part and parcel of the sovereignty of God as it relates to kings and kingdoms. He raises up whom He wills and He throws down whom He wills (Daniel 2:21; 4:25; 5:21) and He turns the king’s heart wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1). The hardening should not be seen as dealing with personal salvation. In Isaiah 63:17, Isaiah includes himself in those whose hearts God had hardened, yet no one would say that Isaiah himself was not saved, or people like Hezekiah, Hosea, and Amos who were contemporaries of Isaiah. [Some may cite the Romans 9:18 passage as evidence that God’s hardening concerns personal salvation. I only note that there are many ways of looking at that passage and the conclusion that it deals with personal salvation is not without doubt, especially given God’s conclusion at the end of the passage in Romans 11:32 that God wills to have mercy on all. See the discussion below.]

Second, in considering whether Pharaoh was a willing or unwilling participant in his own hardening, there is no sense in the passage that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was contrary to Pharaoh’s desire. There are no statements that Pharaoh wanted to be merciful to Israel but God prevented him from doing so. Pharaoh was a hard taskmaster over the Israelites. He was cruel and capricious. He was not a nice person before God sent Moses to Egypt. The fact that Scripture states often that Pharaoh caused his own heart to be hardened lends credence to the view that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was a cooperative effort. It was Pharaoh’s desire to have a hard heart towards Israel.

In fact, I know of no statements in Scripture where anyone wanted to follow God but God prevented them by hardening their hearts. Even on those to whom God had pronounced judgment, God relented when they sought God (Judges 10:11-16; Jonah 3:10). But Scripture also presents a God who will withdraw and watch when we choose to do evil, a God who will give us over to the desires of our hearts (Deuteronomy 32:19-20; Romans 1:26, 28). This may well be the means by which Pharaoh’s heart was hardened. In 2 Thessalonians 2:7, the Apostle Paul speaks of the mystery of lawlessness being restrained but at some point this restraint is lifted. If the restrainer is God the Holy Spirit, the hardening of the heart may be simply a matter of God’s Spirit no longer restraining the

impulses of Pharaoh to have a hard heart. Further, we know that God can accomplish His work through intermediate bad actors (see 1 Kings 22:22 – God’s use of a lying spirit to cause Ahab to go to battle and to his death; Job 1:12 and 2:3 – God’s allowing Satan to attack Job; as well as the many examples of God’s use of wicked kings to accomplish His purposes, see for instance Habakkuk 1:12-13). Thus, consistent with Scripture one may see God accomplishing His hardening by using Pharaoh as the bad actor to work out God’s will. Whether God caused Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened by directly strengthening it to do what Pharaoh really wanted to do (what seems to be the meaning of the verb most frequently used in this passage concerning God’s role) or by withdrawing restraint and allowing Pharaoh free reign to harden his own heart, or through some other means; the sense of the Exodus account is that Pharaoh was seen as a responsible agent for the hardening of his own heart. Pharaoh was not an unwilling participant in the hardening.

Third, God warns us not to harden our hearts against the poor (Deuteronomy 15:7), and not to harden our hearts as the Israelites did in the wilderness (Psalm 95:8; Hebrews 3:8, 15; 4:7). This idea of Israel hardening their own hearts (or necks) against God in the wilderness wanderings is how the Jews in Nehemiah viewed the situation (Nehemiah 9:16-17). They also saw that the same hardening was done by their fathers during the days of the kings (Nehemiah 9:29). God supports this view that Israel was responsible for its own hardening (Jeremiah 7:25-26), and such continued to Jeremiah’s days (Jeremiah 19:15). The scripture further supports man’s responsibility for his own hardening in 2 Kings 17:14 where God explains that the reason for the captivity of the northern ten tribes was because they had hardened their necks against God. And God says of King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, that he (Zedekiah) hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel (2 Chronicles 36:13). Daniel speaks of Nebuchadnezzar as having his spirit hardened in pride (Daniel 5:20) and God acting in response to this. The disciples hearts were hardened during the feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6:52) and after the feeding of the 4,000 (Mark 8:17), when Jesus asks why they did not understand. The sense is that their hardness was caused by themselves, and Jesus was challenging their hard hearts. In Acts 19:9, some were hardened at Ephesus and did not believe. God places the responsibility on us to guard our hearts from hardening. We are warned not to harden our hearts, and there is no sense in these passages that God plays any role in the hardening. Rather, the opposite is true. God is calling us not to harden our hearts. God is not saying one thing and doing another.

So, though God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, the heart of Sihon (Deuteronomy 2:30, also a Hiphil verb form of the verb “to be hard”), and the hearts of the northern kings in Joshua’s days (Joshua 11:20, a Piel verb form of the verb “to strengthen”), these were all in their nationalist role in opposition to Israel. But each of these kings and rulers were already in opposition to Israel. God simply strengthened their hearts to do what they were desiring to do. And they participated in their own hardening.

The same can be supported repeatedly with respect to the hardening of Israel mentioned in Isaiah 63:17, another Hiphil form of a verb meaning “to make hard.” Israel continually sought to go astray from God and willingly participated in its own hardening. And, given

the passage in Romans 1 about the nature of the desires of people who turn away from God, it seems that the Apostle Paul may have had the same sense that God, when hardening a person's heart, is not acting against the person's desires. God gives some over to go their own way so that God's non-salvation purposes may be accomplished.

But, I think it would be wrong to read into these passages as stating that God hardens some people against receiving salvation. Such a position is contrary to the argument of Paul in the book of Romans. The depravity of man in Romans 1 is the backdrop not to the eternal damnation of man, but to the conclusion that all are under sin and all need a savior, whom Paul introduces us to in Romans 3. Likewise, the statement on hardening in Romans 9:18 is the backdrop for the present blindness of the Jewish nation as a whole and the mercy God now extends to all, both Jew and Gentile (Romans 11:32). No one should read Romans 9:18-24 without tracking Paul's logic through to his conclusion in Romans 11:32 that God has concluded all in unbelief that He may have mercy on all. Today, both Jews and Gentiles who confess Jesus are saved (Romans 10:12). Paul understood that the Jewish heart overall was hardened, but nevertheless Paul sought to testify to them so that individuals among them might be saved (Romans 11:13-14). And in following the logic of the passage, the ones being saved are the very ones who were hardened, or in this passage called "blinded." Thus, after distinguishing between the election and those who were blinded (Romans 11:7), Paul proceeds to discuss the nature the blindness (Romans 11:8-10), but then notes that those who are blinded have not stumbled that they should fall (Romans 11:11), but that God has raised up the Gentile Christians to be the means of bringing those who were blinded to the salvation offered in Christ (Romans 11:11-14). For this reason, Paul seeks the salvation of the blinded (or hardened) Jews (Romans 11:14), and if the blinded Jews do not abide in unbelief, they too will be grafted into the plant (Romans 11:23).

Hard hearts ultimately are our responsibility, not God's. God tells us in Joel 2:12 to turn to Him with all of our hearts and to rend our hearts. A broken and repentant heart God will not despise (Psalm 51:17). And God's very nature is to show mercy (Exodus 34:5-7).

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