

# Does God Harden Hearts?

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About twenty verses in Exodus state Pharaoh's heart's present or future condition. Let's look at two and then state the problem.

Exodus 8:15: But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he (Pharaoh) hardened his (Pharaoh's) heart and would not listen to them (Moses and Aaron), as the LORD had said.

Exodus 10:27: But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he (Pharaoh) would not let them go.

The problem: If God hardened Pharaoh's heart and consequently Pharaoh rebelled against God, then God was responsible for Pharaoh's sin and unjust to hold Pharaoh accountable and punish him. Furthermore, at the beginning of it all, God empowers Moses to work miracles in Pharaoh's presence to persuade him to release the Israelites, but God says, "But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" (Ex. 4:21, ESV). For God to incline a person who wants to know and serve Him to mock and rebel against Him is difficult, if not impossible, to justify. However, Pharaoh was not the least interested in knowing or serving God.

Jacob and his family enter Egypt in good standing with Pharaoh. They are given the best of the land (Ge. 45:18). Joseph is the viceroy, and Pharaoh profits much from his stewardship. Pharaoh gains all the money and land of Egypt, and Israel is allowed to dwell there. Generations passed, and there arose a new king who began oppressing Israel (Ex. 1:8ff). During those days, Israel groaned (Ex. 2:23). Israel's sojournment turned into slavery. The ever-growing population of Israel threatens this new Pharaoh (king), and he commands death by drowning of all the Hebrew baby boys. Moses kills an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite to death and flees to Midian because Pharaoh sought to kill him. Then, God calls Moses into service to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage. That Pharaoh dies (Ex. 4:19), and God sends Moses and Aaron to lead Israel out of Egypt.

Exodus 5 begins, "Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" ' But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go" ' " (Ex. 5:1-2).

In the beginning, the sides are clear: God versus Pharaoh. Pharaoh considered himself a god-king, the son of Re (Egyptian sun god), and no one would take his subjects (the Hebrews) away from him. We can say with certainty that Pharaoh would bow to no one, but God would show him who the real God is—the LORD.

However, that doesn't solve the problem. The Scripture still says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Shouldn't God have urged him to repent? Yes, and He did. Time after time (blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock death, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the firstborn's death), God demonstrated His authority and power to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh did not repent. Ironically, God demonstrating His power and urging Pharaoh to repent is the very thing that hardened his heart to rebel until he was finally swallowed up in the sea (Ex. 14:28).

A New Testament passage helps to shine light and remove shadows: "The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:9-12). Paul says that when we exchange the truth about God for a lie, God lets us follow our perverse passions, and when we refuse to acknowledge God, God lets us do what we shouldn't (Rom. 1:24-28).

A modern proverb says, "Take care requesting patience from God; He's almost certain to provide aggravating situations." Pharaoh's heart began hard. After each demonstration of God's power, Pharaoh resolved not to give any ground in his battle against the Almighty. Over and over, God says to Pharaoh, "I am the Lord." Over and over, He proves it by mighty works, and over and over, Pharaoh responds, "No, You are not. I am." God didn't cause Pharaoh's rebellion, nor did He make him not repent. Pharaoh willingly and willfully rebelliously responded to God's judgments, and his heart was hardened thereby.

God's judgments upon our sins demonstrate His mercy. They will soften our hearts and lead us to repentance if we humble ourselves. If we rebel against them, they will harden our hearts and bring us to eternal destruction. The fault is not with God or His judgments; it is with ourselves and our attitude toward His judgments and the truth of God Himself.

The gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), but to those who reject it, who are perishing, it is "a fragrance from death to death" (2 Cor. 2:15-16). The same gospel brings pardon and peace to one, as does condemnation and death to another. Jesus came not to condemn, but save, but to the one who does not believe in the name of and obey the only begotten Son of God, He brings condemnation, and the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:16-18, 36).

Pharaoh was engaged in a battle of wills with the Great I AM. Hardening his heart, he refused to submit to the Lord, the God of Israel, and the wrath of God remained on him, but the choice was his. I don't know what would have happened had Pharaoh softened his heart and repented. I know what will happen if we soften ours, believe in His name, repent our sins, and obey the gospel. We will dwell eternally with God as His people, and He will be our God (Rev. 21:3). Amen.