



STUDY SERIES

Week Six: Pharaoh's Heart - Marc Rader

Bible

Exodus 7:1-5 (NIV) Pharaoh's Heart.

¹ Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. ² You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and

wonders in Egypt, ⁴ he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites.

⁵ And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."

Sermon Outline

In Exodus 7:1-5 Moses and Aaron are sent again to Pharaoh in what becomes the prelude to the plagues; the mighty acts of God that lead to the eventual exodus of the people of Israel. This brief prelude outlines what will happen in the action that follows. They are to reiterate to Pharaoh the Lord's demand to 'let His people go,' but the Lord will harden Pharaoh's heart so that, even though the Lord multiplies His signs and wonders, Pharaoh will not listen to Moses and Aaron until the Lord brings Israel out of Egypt.

The multiplication of the signs and wonders, leading to the exodus are clear, but the interplay between Pharaoh's hard heart and the Lord's action in that, is an equally important dynamic in the narrative. Each of the plague episodes concludes with a reference to Pharaoh's heart (see 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7; 12: 34-35; 10:20, 27; 11:10) so this is obviously an important theme to explore.

However, there is also an ethical question to answer. Is the Lord playing fair? It sounds like He is hardening Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh makes decisions that the Lord punishes. In the Bible, a hard heart is unresponsive to the Lord. If this is the case, how can we maintain the Lord's integrity let alone Pharaoh's free will? This is not the only text where this dynamic is at work, but it is one of the more well known and one of the most developed narratives. What kind can we learn from this text that makes sense of this theme?

To begin with, there are three Hebrew terms that are usually translated as "hardened" in English translations. The first, not surprisingly, is "to make hard". What is surprising is that this verb is only used once – in 7:3. Once the narrative of the plagues actually begins, the other words are used. The second verb is "to be heavy". You can perhaps see why translators didn't use the term "heavy-hearted"? In English, this means a sad heart, but in the Hebrew a "heavy" heart is one that isn't working properly. In 4:10 when Moses describes his lack of eloquence he actually says his tongue is "heavy". Pharaoh's heart is described as "heavy" in the three instances where

Pharaoh goes back on his commitment to let Israel go (see 8:15, 32; 9:34). In these cases his heart is acting deceitfully; not aligning with his actions. The third, and most common verb, is "to strengthen". The idea is to stiffen the resolve or strengthen the will (the heart in the ancient near east was the seat of more than emotions, but of the will); to 'harden' the desire to do what one wishes to do. This suggests that what happens to Pharaoh is that his will to resist the Lord is strengthened. In the early plagues Pharaoh's heart is described as becoming strengthened (7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:35) and in the earliest of these examples, this strengthening comes from the actions of his magicians whose duplication of the signs gives him the strength to ignore the Lord. Later in the plagues, as they become more and more severe, the Lord is the one who strengthens Pharaoh's resolve to do what he wants to do (9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10).

What this means is that the Lord is not acting in unjust ways, nor is Pharaoh being forced to do what he doesn't want to do. In fact, the Lord is enabling Pharaoh to resist Him and the reason He does this is so that the Egyptians might know He is the Lord. Remember, this conflict is not a conflict between two human heads of state, but is a conflict between the gods; between Pharaoh (divine by office) and the Lord (divine by nature). In 5:2, when Moses first gives the Lord's demand to Pharaoh, the king responds dismissively, by asking, "Who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." Throughout the plagues this theme comes up again and again (7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 11:7). And it's not only the Egyptians who need to know that the Lord is God, but the Israelites who will soon be called to trust the power, protection, and provision of the Lord.

The "strengthening" of Pharaoh's heart is, therefore, an important dynamic in the story that follows. It also shifts our attention from the ethics of the engagement to Pharaoh's intentions. We do not get the sense, anywhere in the story, that Pharaoh desperately wants to obey the Lord. In fact, Moses points out that his main problem is that he doesn't fear the Lord (9:30); he doesn't hold the Lord in any kind of respect or awe.

There is also, then, an invitation for us in this story. What is the intention of our hearts? If the Lord was willing to strengthen Pharaoh's heart to bring glory to His name and trust from His people, how much more so will He be willing to strengthen the hearts of those who are committed to Him? Often our hearts are not strong enough to live out what we want to do. We are like the apostle Paul who desired to do what is good but did not carry it out (Romans 7:18). There is a promise in 2 Chronicles 16:9, "For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen [the same verb that is used in Exodus] those whose hearts are fully committed to Him." Perhaps you need the Holy Spirit to strengthen your heart today? The Lord's eyes are on you to do this so that we may live for His glory and more profoundly trust Him.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. Often we can get lost in Bible **study**, missing God's invitation to be shaped by what we read. The objective here is to engage in a conversation around a Biblical idea, and begin to consider its implications for our everyday lives. Where God might be inviting us to act. Take some time to pray and invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time.

1. **Opening Discussion:** Pharaoh's motives ultimately lead to a resistance of God. Where have you experienced resistance from an individual to something you had to do in your life? It may be resistance from colleagues to the implementation of a change at work, or the resistance of a friend over an issue or opinion. Take some time to explore that individual's potential motive, or perspective, why did they resist you, or put up opposition? Share your reflections with the group.

2. **The Bible Together:** Read Exodus 7:1-5 together aloud. Invite the Holy Spirit to open your eyes and ears as you read the passage. What stands out to you? What don't you understand? What is God inviting you to do? What might you share with someone else? - Share your thoughts with the group, commit to exploring God's invitation to you, and resist the urge to provide answers to all the questions others might have.
3. Marc described the three meanings of the words that have been translated as 'hardened' in the NIV translation of Exodus 7-10. How does an understanding of the underlying Hebrew terms help make sense of this passage?
4. Where else in Scripture do we see the hardening of someone or some people's hearts against the will of God? What are the common features of these accounts? (e.g. Jer 18:12, Dan 5:20, Matt 13:15, Rom 2:5, Rev 16:9)
5. Have you ever experienced God strengthening your resolve in order to follow what He has placed on your heart? How did that strengthening come?
6. Are there areas in your life where you experience a hardness of heart towards the will of God? Are there areas in your life where you need God to strengthen your heart, giving you resolve to carry on? Take some time to write down your reflections and then split into pairs to share these with another in the group.

Prayer

Take some time to pray for each others' answers to question 6. Invite the Holy Spirit to soften your heart, submitting your life to God's leading, and also to strengthen your resolve to carry out the work of God in this world.