



Dear Phil

DOES GOD HARDEN PEOPLE'S HEARTS?

What did God do to Pharaoh when He hardened his heart, according to Romans 9:18? —Marty

Dear Marty,

I took Old Testament Theology from a 5-point Calvinist who is an excellent Hebrew scholar and committed to the authority of Scripture. We both agree about what the text says:

1. God was responsible for this Pharaoh coming to power. This accords with Rom. 13:1–3.

2. God's purpose for bringing this Pharaoh to power was to display His power in him and that His name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth (Exod. 9:16).

3. The first mention of hardening is Exod. 4:21 where God tells Moses that He will harden Pharaoh's heart.

4. God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart nine times (Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). Pharaoh hardens his heart three times (Exod. 8:15, 32; 9:34). Pharaoh's heart is described as hard or hardened six times (Exod. 7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:18, 35).

5. The essential meaning of "hardening" is "to strengthen or to give courage to do what one really wants to do."

This meaning is confirmed by uses of the same terminology (hardening of the heart) outside of the Pharaoh story. The key texts that have shaped my understand-

ing are as follows:

Deut. 2:30. Here the Lord hardened the spirit and strengthened the heart of Sihon to refuse Israel passage through His land. Even though Israel had a huge standing army (600,000+)—a fact which might have made Sihon be glad to let them pass unmolested through his land—God strengthened his heart to try to do what he really wanted to do: destroy Israel. As a result Israel destroyed Sihon.

Josh. 11:20. The cities of the Transjordan all fought against Joshua because God hardened their hearts to meet Israel in battle, so that they would receive no mercy. Implied: They would have received mercy if they had surrendered. God wanted to destroy them so he strengthened their hearts to do what they really wanted to do: fight Israel. God sovereignly determined not to grant them mercy in this situation, though they had received mercy for four hundred years prior to the Exodus (Gen. 15:16).

2 Chron. 13:7. This was a clincher for me. You can't see it as clearly in English as in the Hebrew. The NASB reads: "and worthless men gathered about him, scoundrels, who proved too strong for Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, when he was young and timid [soft

of heart] and could not hold his own against them." Rehoboam was "soft of heart" rather than hard of heart. In his case, it was a bad thing. He was soft and could not really stand up for what he wanted. As a result, he was swayed by the scoundrels who gathered around him. If God had "hardened" his heart, he probably would have been better off.

Note also Psalm 27:14 and 31:25, where we are encouraged to "be strong and let your hearts take courage." One of the same key verbs used with Pharaoh occurs in these verses as well.

Once I understood what "hardened" meant—to strengthen a person's resolve to do what he or she really wants to do—what appeared to be a conflict between God's justice and His sovereign action in Pharaoh's heart dissipated. God wasn't making Pharaoh do something he didn't want to do or would not have wanted to do. God was essentially helping him stand up for his [wicked] principles so that God could demonstrate His greater power.

I conclude then that God chose a man He knew was wicked and would want to resist His will and raised him up as Pharaoh. He then strengthened Pharaoh to withstand the pressure He was going to put on him, so that the whole world would know how great God is.

Whom then does God harden? Those whose hearts have rejected the overtures of His grace and are set to do their own will. Upon whom does God have mercy? Those who submit themselves under His mighty hand.

Is this divine sovereignty? Absolutely! Arbitrary and unconditional? Absolutely not.

Philip ■

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