

Hardening Hearts and Free Will

It's clear from the Bible that God wants us to love Him and to worship Him, to know that He is not just powerful but that He is good and loving and has good and loving plans for us. I don't know how anyone could say that this isn't central to God's revelation of Himself throughout Scripture, and especially as He has revealed Himself to us through His Son, Jesus. Despite what seems to me to be so obvious, there are some Christian groups that portray the Almighty as callous and uncaring, arbitrary, choosing some for salvation and others for eternal punishment, not on the basis of what was in their heart, but merely for His own purposes, out of His own random plan that we can know nothing, or at least very little, about.

Here's one of the texts that causes people problems. It's found in Romans 9, but it repeats a pattern that occurs in various parts of the Bible. It has to do with God hardening a person's heart so that they don't humble themselves and repent ... or so it seems:

God said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on a person's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display My power in you and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens whom He wants to harden."
(Romans 9:14-18)

At first glance, you would have to say that this passage tells us that God's will is irresistible, that we have no choice in our response to Him. If we want His mercy and He chooses to harden our hearts, we will not receive His mercy, even if we are humble and repentant. Fortunately, that's not what the text is saying, so let's dig in a little deeper.

To get the clear picture of what Paul is saying in this part of Romans, we need to back up a bit.

1. The first thing we need to note is that the context for this section is Paul's grief for his people, the Jews, because so many have rejected Jesus. In verse 2 we read, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." This is personal for Paul - God has come in the person of His Son and the Jewish leaders and many followers have rejected His claim to be their Messiah. Paul goes on from there to say that the true children of Abraham are children of promise - and here he quotes the promise the angel gave to Sarah, Abraham's wife. This promise would come to include Jacob, who was Abraham's grandson, but not his brother Esau, whom God rejected.
2. The second thing that's important to notice in this chapter comes from verse 14, where Paul asks the question, in light of this acceptance of Jacob and rejection of Esau, "Is God unjust?" The fact that Paul raised this question shows us that he is well aware of the moral dimension of what he's writing about. And he concludes,

rather quickly, that God is not unjust because He has the right to show mercy to whoever He chooses to show mercy. That's where we came in.

3. The third thing that we need to observe here is what comes immediately after our section, and that is verse 19: "One of you will say to me, 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists His will?' Again, Paul is recognizing a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

There are two possibilities:

1. That God's will is irresistible AND He still has the right to find fault with us, or
2. That God's will is not irresistible and so the argument that God is unjust fails.

We have lots of evidence from Scripture that God's will is not irresistible. I gave some examples last week, but one of the most obvious is from Jesus, and this time I'll read it from Matthew 23:37:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

There's a clear example of human will standing up against God's will and having its way. Or another example comes from Peter's second letter, 3:9:

The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise ... He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Another pair of texts, similar and both from Ezekiel:

I take no pleasure in the death of anyone declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live! (18:32)

"As surely as I live," declares the Sovereign LORD, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (33:11)

What God wants, what He wills in His sovereign will, is not being done on earth as it is in heaven and so Jesus asks us to pray that it will be done. This is what you call an obvious truth from Scripture - I don't see how you can deny it. And yet those who argue that God's will IS always being done, that no one can resist His will, support that argument by saying that God does what He wills for His own good pleasure - even while God says He is getting no pleasure from the deaths of the wicked.

There's something missing from our analysis of the texts at this point, something we're not understand-ing. Often a key to gaining understanding when the waters seem muddy is to go back to the Old Testament context and what the original meaning was - then we can apply that to the New Testament passage we're having trouble understanding. For our purposes today, that means going back to the story of Pharaoh and how God hardened his heart.

At the beginning of Exodus 7, God sends Moses to Pharaoh in order to demand the release of all the Hebrew slaves and He tells Moses, "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart and though I multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to

you.” And then God tells Moses that He will then bring His people out of Egypt and that the Egyptians will know that He, Yahweh, is LORD.

But in the text that follows, which describes ten plagues that the LORD sends on Egypt, only three times does He harden Pharaoh’s heart.

Plague #1: the waters of the Nile are turned to blood, but Pharaoh’s magicians seem to be able to do the same thing and Pharaoh’s heart became hard. (7:22)

Plague #2: the land is covered in frogs and, though the magicians seem to be able to produce frogs as well, they can’t get rid of them. When Moses does get them out of there, “Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said.” (8:15)

Plague #3: Gnats are everywhere and Pharaoh’s magicians tell him, “This is the finger of God.” “But Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said.” (8:19)

Plague #4: When the plague of flies is over, Pharaoh hardened his own heart. (8:32)

Plague #5: After the disease of the cattle, we’re told, “Pharaoh’s heart was unyielding.” (9:7)

Plague #6: The plague of boils is inflicted on the Egyptians and, for the first time, “the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron.” (9:12)

Plague #7: is the plague of hail that flattens the barley and the flax. After Moses goes out from Pharaoh’s presence and prays for the plague to stop - and it stops - the text says, “He and his officials hardened their hearts.”

Plague #8: After the eighth plague, the plague of locusts, we’re told that the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he refused to let Israel go.

Plague #9: The plague of darkness, after which the LORD again hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

Plague #10 was the death of the firstborn and after that Pharaoh let Israel go. But after they leave, God again hardens Pharaoh’s heart and he chases after them, right into the Red Sea where God shows His great power to all Egypt and the chariots and horsemen of Pharaoh are drowned in the sea.

The word that is translated “hardened” means to “strengthen”, to make something more firm, more resolute. If you are, in your heart of hearts, resisting God, opposed to His rule, undermining His Kingdom, then anything that strengthens you in that resolve is, in effect, hardening your position, making you more firm. Pharaoh was not looking out for Israel’s best interests, nor did he have a vibrant faith in God - his heart was already hard ... and it got harder.

An important question to ask at this point is, “What did it mean that Pharaoh’s heart was hardened?” Did it have anything to do with eternal salvation or judgment? No. It had everything to do with Pharaoh’s resolve to keep his huge slave force on the job. Whenever he felt pressed by circumstances to let the Israelites go, he felt even more pressed by the fact that he had come to depend on them.

It’s important to notice that the book of Exodus contains a ton of detail about Moses’ interaction with the Pharaoh. Moses goes back to Egypt in chapter 4 and the tenth

plague is in chapter 12. God is still hardening the hearts of Pharaoh and the Egyptians in chapter 14 when they decide to chase the Israelites along the dry ground through the Red Sea. But one of the very key points in this story is found in connection with the plague of hail, the seventh plague. Here's the dialogue:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what Yahweh the God of the Hebrews says: Let My people go, so that they may worship Me, or this time I will send the full force of My plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out My hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" (Ex. 9:13-16)

Why do you think God would tell Pharaoh that "by now I could have ... wiped you off the earth"? He couldn't have been talking about waiting until He got His strength up - He could have wiped them out at any time. What does He mean? The most likely conclusion is that God was saying, "I was, and I am, morally justified in destroying you and your nation. You have done enough, now, to merit the maximum sentence, capital punishment, for your continued rebellion against God. Even your magicians and wise men are telling you that you're confronting the living God and still you have no fear, no respect. But, I have a different purpose for you, a bigger purpose. My intention is to display the greatness of My power to you, and through you to the whole world so that My name will be proclaimed in all the earth!" Pharaoh will witness the power of God's judgment, and will see first hand that God's power is much greater than his own.

At this point in the series of plagues, has Pharaoh done enough to deserve God's judgment? He has begged for mercy over and over again during the first six plagues and then, when God extends mercy to him, he changes his mind and refuses to let Israel go. He is obviously not concerned with God and is only seeking to maintain his power, his reputation and his slave labour. He doesn't think God can prevent that from happening. Yes, he's done enough to deserve being punished, but still God will use Pharaoh for His glory.

Now, we jump back to the passage in Romans 9 and look again at the question that Paul asked, "Is God unjust?" The answer from the book of Exodus and again here in Romans is that, no, God is patient with people who do evil and just when He judges them. Pharaoh deserved to be judged for continually rejecting God's commands and for assuming that he was at least as powerful as the God of the Hebrews.

In the context of Romans 9, Paul is talking about the justice of God in judging the Jews, His own people. God has patiently waited for them to discover His heart for the whole world, to become a missionary people who will demonstrate to the world the blessings of following in His ways. But consistently they have rejected that part of their calling and now have rejected the promised Messiah and His message of love and hope for all people. Is God just in judging them, in showing mercy to the Gentiles and

in, seemingly, abandoning His promise to Abraham? Paul will deal with God's promises to Abraham in the following couple of chapters, but here he is saying that God is just, that He doesn't harden hearts that are soft towards Him but hearts that are already resistant, already rebellious. This hardening, as we'll see later, results in great blessing to the Gentiles who are now to be included in the family of God, but it isn't meant to last forever - there will be a future turning to God among the Jews.

But there's another important point about hardening that I haven't covered yet ... and that is that it doesn't seem to be a lasting condition. Pharaoh's heart was hardened, by himself and later by God, but then it became soft again. His resolve weakened and he asked for mercy and for prayer and he said he would let Israel go ... but then it firmed up again. He became more determined than ever to keep the people of Israel in slavery and his resolve got firmer. The hardening of his heart wasn't a permanent, or even a very long-lasting thing.

Other people who hardened their own hearts were not able to later become more open and flexible - like the Israelites in the wilderness who rebelled against God and were not able to enter the Promised Land - their hearts were set against God and they wanted nothing more than to return to slavery in Egypt. Their rebellion justified God's judgment because it had quickly spread to the majority of the Israelites and threatened the whole mission of God.

Let's try to bring these strands together and make some conclusions and some applications:

1. Most of the hardening of hearts that is done in Scripture is done by humans. It is our rebellion against God. Ephesians 4:17 & 18 describe the ungodly as people who have shut their minds and hardened their hearts against God. Hebrews 3:13 tells us that our hearts become hard when we are deceived by sin. In Mark 6:52 we read that the disciples didn't understand the importance of the miracle of multiplying the loaves of bread because their hearts were hard and they did not believe. So, sin and unbelief and rebellion are signs that we have hardened our hearts against God.
2. When God hardens someone's heart it is a form of judgment. The people whose hearts are "firmed up" or "strengthened" in their rebellion against God are already well on their way. They have already given a strong indication that they don't want to submit their lives to the Lord. In other words, they deserve it - and Paul maintains that God is just in doing it.
3. We have no indication that God is arbitrary in hardening one person's heart and not doing so with someone else. That's how it may appear to us when we read a verse like Romans 9:18: "God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens whom He wants to harden." It sounds arbitrary and capricious, but it's never that way in reality. In reality, God responds to people's heart and their intentions towards Him. Pharaoh pushed as hard as he could against God's purposes for Israel and he was judged for it. Others, like Rahab of Jericho, heard what God had done for Israel and believed and took their side when they came against Jericho and was favoured by God in response. God responds to what's in

our heart - that picture is repeated over and over again in Scripture - and shows His justice, His fairness, in doing that (and in many other ways).

Let's close with a couple of applications:

1. When people accuse God of being arbitrary or random in His choosing of people to know Him, they are really accusing Him of being unjust. They are saying that He doesn't care what's in a person's heart, what they've done or not done, whether they are sincere in pursuing truth or not - they are saying He doesn't care about any of those things. He has the right to choose and He chooses - and that's not a fair picture of the God of the Bible. He is portrayed in Scripture as on the lookout for hearts that will be devoted to Him and that He responds to faith and that He gives us freedom to choose for or against Him. The God of Scripture is always portrayed as the God of justice ... and of mercy. He is a good God. We have to reject this false view of God as being so preoccupied with determining everything that happens on earth that He is unresponsive to the humble heart that might be seeking Him. He is not only responsive to the person who is seeking Him, He is also very, very patient with those who are not. Look at how patient He was with Pharaoh, a man who was making life almost unbearable for the people of God. We can't lose the concept of a God who is just and patient, who is gracious and compassionate, who is good in all His dealings with the human race. That's how the Bible portrays Him and we must hang on to that.
2. The second application is simply that we have to guard our hearts. If humans are the number 1 agents of hardening, we have to keep a lookout. When we deliberately choose rebellion over obedience, we harden ourselves against God's purposes in our lives. What God wants for us is that we know Him and that we trust Him, that we would know Him and trust Him enough to believe that following His ways, obeying the leading of His Spirit, is best for us and best for the others in our lives - our family, our friends. Several times in Scripture, including four times in the letter to the Hebrews, we are told, "Don't harden your hearts." And that's an encouragement that I want to include in this message on hardening today. Let's keep our hearts open to this God of love, this God who died a sinner's death on our behalf, this God who came not to condemn the world but to save it, this God who has adopted us into His family and calls us His dear children. Resist the world as it tries to make us think of God as cruel, unjust and unloving - that's not who He is. Rather than be influenced by those voices, let's be influencers who help people know and understand the God who loved us and gave Himself for us.