

Episode-216

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. We're continuing the Difficult Passages in the Bible series today. Joining me, as usual, is Kevin, the Managing Editor of GotQuestions.org, and Jeff, the Managing Editor of BibleRef.com.

Shea Houdmann

And today, as all the previous episodes, we're going to be tackling a question that we get a lot of. And depending on your theological persuasion, you either have a little bit of a problem with it or a lot of bit of a problem with it. And that is, why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? This is the story of the Exodus, Moses and Pharaoh. To start us off, I'm going to read a couple of the relevant passages so you know for sure what we're talking about here. So it's first mentioned in Exodus 7, verses 3 to 4, where it says, God speaking, but I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous science and wonders in Egypt, 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 people the Israelites.

Shea Houdmann

So here's God promising that He is at some point going to harden Pharaoh's heart. Sounds unjust. Why would God do that? Why would God harden someone and then judge that someone and his nation for that action? Well, there's more to it than this. In the first few plagues, we get to Exodus chapter 8, verse 8-15 says, but when Pharaoh saw that there was a reason, he hardened his heart. And also in 8-32, but this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart. So while chapter 7 mentions that it's God will harden Pharaoh's heart, Exodus chapter 8 and following gives us more of the kind of behind-the-scenes story where Pharaoh is actually hardening his own heart and does not tell later that the Exodus in the account of the plagues where it actually says God hardened Pharaoh's heart. So Kevin, what are we to make of this? How is it just for God to harden Pharaoh's heart even after the fact that Pharaoh initially hardened his own heart?

Kevin Stone

Well, we know that everything that God does is just and righteous. And so if scripture says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, we know that that was the just and righteous thing to do. God actually mentions that He's going to harden Pharaoh's heart in Exodus chapter 4 as well. So at least twice with Moses, God kind of gives him the heads up that, you know, you're going to go and do this mission for me, but Pharaoh's not going to listen to you. And so

don't be surprised, don't get discouraged because this is what's going to happen. Pharaoh's heart will be hardened. And as Exodus 4 and 7 both say, God predicts, you know, I'm going to be doing the hardening at least later on in the narrative.

Kevin Stone

And as you said, Shea, the initial hardening of Pharaoh's heart was done by Pharaoh himself. The first two plagues, the magicians there in Pharaoh's court were able to duplicate them and so they didn't seem to have much of an impact on Pharaoh's heart. He just said, well, it's, you know, my guys can do that too. But after the third one, the magician said, this is the finger of God. The magicians in Pharaoh's own court were acknowledging that this was something different. This was the power of God. The Egyptian gods could not duplicate this. But even that doesn't seem to have much of an effect.

Pharaoh just kind of poo-pooed it and did not allow his heart to be softened by these miracles at all.

Kevin Stone

And as we go through the narrative, we see that Pharaoh was very definitely actively resisting the truth, the truth that he knew. Pharaoh sees that there's a difference being made between the Egyptians and the Israelites and all of these plagues. And Pharaoh seems to repent even a couple times where he, in Exodus chapter 9 and again in Exodus chapter 10, he says, I've sinned. The Lord is right. I and my people are wrong.

Kevin Stone

And then he has all these promises too, where he says, I'm going to let you go now. And, you know, you can go and worship the Lord and all of this. He says this several times, makes several promises. Every one of those promises is broken. And all of those instances of repentance, well, when he gets some breathing room, when he gets some time to think about it, he changes his mind again and goes right back to his obstinacy. So, there's a battle of wills going on and Pharaoh is actively resisting the will of God. He's setting up his own will in opposition to that.

Kevin Stone

And this type of continued rebellion against what you know to be right, Pharaoh knew the truth. It reminds me of Romans chapter 1, where God, Paul writing it through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, goes through a description of the ungodly and kind of a downward spiral that they were in, a progression into wickedness and the hardening of their hearts. In Romans 1, Paul says that they have, he speaks of a group of people who have suppressed the truth in their unrighteousness. And that's verse 18. Paul says that they knew God, but they did not glorify him as God and they did not give him thanks as their

creator. That's verse 21. And then they exchanged the glory of the creator for images, idols made to look like created things. But they're worshipping the creation rather than the creator, and that's verse 23. And because of these things, because of the hardness of their hearts, we read that, verse 24, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity. In verse 26, God gave them over to shameful lusts. And in verse 28, God gave them over to a depraved mind.

Kevin Stone

So this giving over of the wicked who are more and more confirmed in their wickedness seems to me to be a whole lot like what's happening in Exodus as Pharaoh is being given over by God to his own corrupt, sinful nature. As Pharaoh was rebelling against God and hardening his own heart for the first six plagues, then after the sixth plague, which the plague of boils, we start reading that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. So God steps in and confirms the hardness that Pharaoh had chosen for himself, confirmed him in his obstinacy and his rebellion. And I see a lot of parallels there between what was going on in Pharaoh's heart and the hearts of those mentioned in Romans chapter one.

Jeff Laird

I remember seeing a parody of a motivational poster, and I think the poster had a picture of a wrecked oil tanker on it. And it said, it might be that the purpose of your life is to serve as a warning to others. And you see some of that in this account. A more serious quote for me comes from Proverbs 29.1. And in essence, Proverbs 29.1 says that a person who's constantly stubborn towards God is going to be cut off suddenly and without any remedy. In other words, if you continue to resist and resist and resist, eventually the other shoe is going to drop, the guillotine blade is going to come down, however you want to think of it. And that's going to be just the end of it. And then you're on your own.

Jeff Laird

Pharaoh's example shows some of this. He resists and he resists and he resists. And then God decides to say, look, you had an opportunity to be an example of my mercy and my grace, an example of a leader who saw the truth and was willing to accommodate that and move towards it. Since you are not going to do that, I'm going to turn you into an example of what happens when you resist me. So yes, God definitely did reach down there and change Pharaoh's mind, make him do something different than he had intended to do. But that all came after this sort of cutoff. This was after this time where he had his opportunities and they weren't there.

Jeff Laird

It's interesting when you do walk through the actual verses, like Kevin, you were saying, is you see those in there. So for those who want to flip through in Exodus, these will all be from Exodus 4.21, God says, I'm going to harden. And that's way in advance. In 5.2, Pharaoh is already hardened. That's when he's having the people make bricks and straw. God says in 7.3, I will harden as I multiply my wonders. And at no point yet, as he said, he's actually done this. 7.22, it says that Pharaoh's heart remained hardened because it already was. In 8.15, Pharaoh hardens his heart. 8.19, his heart was hardened. Doesn't say God did it. 8.32, Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also. And that also is important because it does imply that previous times were things that he had done. 9.7, his heart was hardened. Doesn't say that it was by God. 9.12 is the first time that you see the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh. And this was after the plague of boils. And then what happens? 9.34, after the plague of hail, Pharaoh hardens his own heart.

Jeff Laird

And the verse after that, 35 says, so in this way, paraphrasing, the heart of Pharaoh was hardened. In other words, it's a way of saying this was how he was doing this. That verse also mentions that it's Pharaoh and his officials who are doing this. So that in 10.1, God says, I did it. 10.20, God says, I did it. 10.27, God did it. 11.10, God did it. And then in Exodus 14.4, you get God, this is before the Red Sea and after the Passover where God again says, I'm going to harden Pharaoh's heart. And he does that in 14.8. Finally, in 14.17, right before the Egyptians go into the Red Sea, you see another example of God saying, I'm going to harden the hearts of the Egyptians.

Jeff Laird

So it's not just Pharaoh who's experiencing this, but you can see that very clear progression that there is opportunity there for Pharaoh. He has a chance to listen, to respond, and he chooses not to. The word that's used in here to talk about this idea is one that basically means to be stubborn or resistant or unyielding, this just refusal to move. That's why the Bible sometimes talks about a stiff neck. You know, if you have an animal or a person who just refuses to bend, that's where you wind up.

Jeff Laird

So yes, it's terrifying in a sense to think that you could get to a point where God would look down and say, you have used up all of your grace. You have used up all the opportunities I was going to give you in order to change this on your own. And now instead of using you as an example of mercy, I'm going to use you as a warning to others. And that seems to be what happened with

Pharaoh. It's horrible and horrifying, but it's something that's well within God's rights and clearly something he did because of Pharaoh's initial choices.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, that's such a great point. It's something that's so often missed when people, they just hear God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And that's all they can focus on is to the point of forgetting who this person actually was and even beyond Pharaoh hardening his own hearts earlier. This Egyptian Pharaoh was enslaving an entire nation, like brutally enslaving. And it's not clear whether the policy of all Hebrew baby boys are to be thrown into the Nile and killed, whether that was still taking place.

Shea Houdmann

But it was not a group of innocent Egyptians who were not doing anything wrong that God suddenly, I'm going to harden these people so therefore that I can judge. No, these were wicked people making wicked decisions, despite, like as Kevin was saying, despite, they knew what they were doing was wrong. God had made it clear to him that this behavior was wrong. God had already at this point made it clear to Pharaoh that he was superior to the false gods that Pharaoh was worshiping. So it's not like God is like picking some random innocent person and saying, I'm going to force you to do bad things so that I can punish you. No, this is God taking a person and a nation who was willingly following him, who were already choosing actively of their own free will to commit brutal acts, do horrible things, and then he's judging them further by hardening them further, allowing for the full extent of his judgment to come out.

Shea Houdmann

So it's important to remember exactly what's happening in this passage and exactly who was the person that God hardened. It's not the, oh, why would God do something so horrible to someone so innocent? It's like Pharaoh was far from innocent. And as you said, the key point in this passage is Pharaoh hardened his own heart first, bringing God's judgment, bringing God to fulfill his plan to free the Israelites by judging the Egyptians harshly in response to the evil actions they had perpetrated against the Israelites.

Kevin Stone

Yes, the 10 plagues that God sent into Egypt kind of represented a judgment day for Egypt. After a long history of infanticide and slavery and oppression, God said it's time to face some judgment. And yeah, Pharaoh was not this, you know, nice, soft-hearted guy that God decided, you know, well, I just don't like him. I'm going to harden his heart and do away with him. That's not the case at all. Pharaoh was a bad guy. Pharaoh was a wicked king, and this wicked king had been oppressing people for a long, long time. And so God, in

his hardening, how it was done exactly? Well, I think maybe kind of like a hands-off approach as God saw that Pharaoh's heart was hard. Pharaoh had hardened his own heart through most of the plagues, and God just kind of says, okay.

Kevin Stone

And all God has to do is withhold his grace, you know, because without grace, all of us have a hard heart. And so God withholds his grace from Pharaoh here. He gives him up to the hardness of his own heart. He gives him up to his own wicked ways. He leaves Pharaoh to the corruption of his sinful nature, and he hands him over to the temptations of Satan. Because Satan was obviously wanting Pharaoh to rebel, and God just lets him go with that temptation. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is something that Scripture says that God did, but God was righteous, and it was a righteous judgment against Pharaoh and the people of Egypt in all of this.

Shea Houdmann

Often when we study this passage, it's easy just to only focus on what's going on in Exodus. But there's another passage in the New Testament that we need to really focus on, and that's in Romans chapter 9. I mean, there's several things in Romans chapter 9 that talks about this, but let me read in verses 17 and 18, again, of Romans chapter 9. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you, 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.

Shea Houdmann

So, the passage in Romans chapter 9 goes on to talk about comparing human beings to lumps of clay. Does not God have the right to do with this lump of clay what he wants, and this other lump of clay something entirely different? Picturing that Pharaoh was a lump of clay that God decided to judge further by hardening his heart further.

Shea Houdmann

So, Jeff, I'd love for you to step in on this one. How do these two passages fit together? And ultimately, trusting in God's sovereignty, how is it fair and right for him to, in the sense, treat people differently, to harden some, not harden others, and judge people accordingly?

Jeff Laird

Yeah, and I think that's one of the two key things in this that really sticks. The other we'll get to in a minute, but the idea that God could just say, I'm choosing to do this to this person. When we talk about words like fair, again, sometimes we just have to look at things in sort of the logical sense. That

doesn't mean we have to like it. We don't have to look at something and say, oh, I think this is wonderful. We just have to say, look, this is exactly the way things are.

Jeff Laird

And no matter what a person's worldview is, at some point in time, you're going to agree that there are things about reality that just are. Whether you like it or not, this is just the way they are. One of those is that God is not just like other people. He is not a very advanced person with no apology to people who think otherwise, and you know who you are. He's not just some president or some emperor or some person who's become enlightened. He's a completely different sort of reality and being. He is the creator. Every aspect of our existence is only because of what he's chosen to do in the first place.

Jeff Laird

So I don't like the thought of being compared to a tin soldier or a lump of clay or Lego pieces or whatever else, because I want to think of myself as this, this big, important thing. And God shows that he has value in who I am and what I am. But at the same time, I am not on his level. He is the creator. And that's what Romans nine is talking about is saying for a person to say, how dare you raise up Pharaoh in order to show your power would be like a person saying, how dare you make that piece of clay into a pot when you should have made it into this, especially when it's the lump of clay itself saying, who are you to do this? Exactly who he is. He is the potter. He is the creator. That's the hard side of it is that God has the absolute right to treat any of us in any way he would see fit.

Jeff Laird

However, because his nature is also merciful and loving, he provides us with opportunities to avoid these things. I think that's why it's so important to see that Pharaoh had opportunities before this in order to demonstrate something. Could God have just said, I'm never even going to give Pharaoh the chance? Yes, he could. Would that be fair? That doesn't even almost mean anything. None of us would deserve God's mercy or grace in the first place. It would be fair if God just obliterated the entire universe and started all over like a kid sweeping the sandcastle off to the side.

Jeff Laird

So Romans is basically trying to drive us down to this important idea of saying, you have to start from the understanding that God is God and we are not everything else flows after that. But as we look at that, God also gives us encouragement by saying, look, there are chances. There are opportunities. Even Pharaoh had a chance to respond the right way, and he decided he was not going to. And that's where he passed that point of no

return. So God maintained both his sovereignty and his justice and his ability to say, you still have choice and ability. I just know how it's going to go and I know what I'm going to do.

Kevin Stone

The extent of Pharaoh's hardness of heart is even seen after the 10th plague. I think very clearly as even after that horrible plague and all the loss of life that Egypt had experienced that night, the Egyptians, they kind of forced the Israelites out. They give them all their treasures and say, just leave, please leave. So they're on their way out, and then Pharaoh musters an army to chase him down and either destroy him or bring him back. I don't know what his plan was, but that shows a very, very hard heart. There's no two ways about it. Pharaoh saw all the miracles. Just think of it. He saw more miracles than any of us will probably ever see. He had the spokesman for God, prophet for God, standing right in front of him and conversed with him on how many occasions, and yet with all of that, he still chose to harden his heart. And then God confirmed in judgment, confirmed his hardness and said, I will allow you to go your own way and experience my full judgment.

Jeff Laird

That I think ties well into the other thing about this that's very, very hard when we look at this, is to remember that so far, pretty much everything we're saying is all Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Pharaoh. Yes, Pharaoh, but this is not God delivering plagues on Pharaoh's person, Pharaoh's property, Pharaoh's stuff specifically. All of the people of Egypt are experiencing these things. So the death of the firstborn, the death of livestock, boils and flies and frogs and everything else like that. All of the people of Egypt are experiencing that. And that's the other side of it that's difficult because God is hardening Pharaoh's heart. He's judging Pharaoh. He's doing harsh things to Pharaoh, but God is also doing those hard and harsh things to all of the people of Egypt. And how do we process that? How do we understand that?

Jeff Laird

Romans nine is a start that if God chooses, he wants to create people just for that purpose. And I'm not being callous or coy about that, but that's just the psychological starting point.

Jeff Laird

But after that, there's a couple of key things in this thing from Exodus, where we see that Pharaoh's advisors at times harden their hearts, that all of the Egyptians are hardened sometimes by God. It's hard for us to grasp it, but at the end of the day, every single one of us is individually responsible for everything that we say or we do. All of us are. And that doesn't matter what

our circumstances are, even when those circumstances are difficult. Has there ever been a time in history when a brutal dictator has been overthrown by his own people? Yes, it has happened. Has there ever been a time where advisors have stepped in and said, this person is completely out of control. We're going to step in. Yes, it has. So it's not like all of the people of Egypt were for all time, completely incapable of ever doing anything about what was going on.

Jeff Laird

That doesn't mean that they were making the choices, but it does provide some accountability, some conviction for us when it comes to things like choosing leaders. We are accountable for the people that we choose to give support to, the people we obey, the people we submit to, the people that we work with. And the obedience being the important thing. The people of Egypt are suffering in this. And we have to remember that that's a tough thing to think about, but we also have to remember that that doesn't mean that the people of Egypt don't have any agency in what's going on. They were participating in a system that did these awful, terrible things. They were not doing what they probably could have done or should have done in order to work against this. It's not a blanket sense of blame. It's just something to remember that even though it's tough to see that this is happening to the people, I think the better lesson is just to remember that leaders matter and each of us in our own individual lives, how we choose to interact with society around us makes a difference. Because that which we don't choose to stand up against is something that ultimately we are helping to enable. And when the consequences come for that, they can be awfully bad.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, that's a great point. I think maybe the best word I'm thinking of is the Egyptians were complicit in Pharaoh's decisions. They were also reaping the benefit of having an entire nation of slaves to basically do all the hard work for them. They were participating to varying degrees in the abuse, torture, all the horrible things that were involved in forced manual labor. No indication that anyone in Egypt ever had a problem with what Pharaoh had ultimately decided in terms of enslaving the Israelites. So it's interesting, even difficult even to think about. Yes, ultimately an entire nation is suffering for one man's actions, but that's assuming that the nation wasn't fully supportive of his actions. And there's nothing in the text that would indicate that they weren't. It seems like the entire nation of Egypt was very happy reaping the benefits of the Israelites being brutally enslaved, and therefore they were all, it was just for God to judge the entire nation.

Jeff Laird

Pharaoh wasn't throwing those babies in the Nile by himself.

Shea Houdmann

Precisely. So yes, this passage, the whole God heartening Pharaoh's heart, it's difficult in the sense we don't like the idea of God overriding our free will. And there are actually divisions of Christianity who will say that God never overrides a person's free will. And I would say, really? This is not the only passage in the Bible that speaks of God basically changing someone, changing someone's direction, whether it's for the good or for the bad, of God overriding someone's free will. It's a whole other episode as to what degree are our wills free. It can get philosophical and get biblical and so forth, but not today's topic. But the idea that God is somehow limited, that his omnipotence ends where our free will begins, that's not a biblical concept. So if your view is that God can't do something like this, well, then your view needs to change because God can and God does.

Shea Houdmann

But then looking at the passage, there are extenuating circumstances that helps you understand better why God did what he did in the way that he did and how he used that to bring about the results that he desired. So, God hardening Pharaoh's heart, it's not an easy thing to understand. It's not something that we have to be comfortable with. Jeff, I like how you emphasize the fact we don't have to like this, that we also have to trust that God is righteous, God is just. As Kevin said at the beginning, every decision he makes, everything that he does is perfectly holy. Therefore, there's nothing wrong with this, that God is the creator, he has the right to do with his creation as he sees fit. And that needs to be our ultimate attitude that informs how we view passages like this, that I don't like the idea of God forcing me to do something or changing my mind about something, but I recognize entirely his right to do it and trust him, whether he's doing something to me or he's doing something to someone else, whether it's a text in the Bible. I trust him, and I know ultimately that he is sovereign, that he is good, and that as Romans 8.28, God works all things together for good. We can even see that in this passage, what the end result was.

Shea Houdmann

So, this has been the Got Questions podcast on why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? I hope our conversation today has been encouraging to you, helps you to understand both Exodus and Romans chapter 9 a little bit better. We have articles on GotQuestions.org that deal with this issue and that deals with those sovereignty, free will. So, I invite you to read some of those, watch our other videos. If this issue is still bothering you, of course, you can

ask us at GotQuestions.org. So, Got Questions, the Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.