

How Should We Think About the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus?

SUMMARY/OVERVIEW

As readers trek through the book of Exodus, one of the issues that causes many to scratch their heads is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

We read about this hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 7:1-5. In this passage, God tells Moses, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (v. 3). Despite the signs that God performs in Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to the message that Moses and his brother, Aaron, bring. God will nevertheless deliver His people from slavery, with this stated result: "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" (v. 5).

Pharaoh's hard-heartedness then remains a theme throughout this section of Exodus. There are times when Pharaoh's heart is simply described as "hard" or "unyielding" (Exodus 7:14, 22; 8:19; 9:7). There are times when Exodus records that *Pharaoh* hardened his heart (Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34). And there are times when we're told that *the LORD* hardens Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10).

How should we think about this hardening of Pharaoh's heart?

WHAT WE'VE GOT TO SAY OUT OF THE GATE

In this story, we see God sovereignly working to accomplish His purposes. Right out of the gate, we have to admit this is a difficult topic that touches both on God's sovereignty (in the LORD hardening Pharaoh's heart, cf. Romans 9:16-21) and human responsibility (in the passages talking about Pharaoh hardening his heart). We're not going to solve this mystery in one front-and-back page. We shouldn't let this keep us from pressing in and learning what we can from this section of the Bible, however.

SO WHAT CAN WE SAY, AND HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT THIS?

Knee-jerk reactions come to the surface for many as they read this section of the Bible. We begin asking questions like "Why would God do this?" and saying "But that doesn't seem fair!" Rather than immediately putting God on the hot seat in this story, however, it's important for us to keep at least three "big picture" things in mind as we think about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. While these things may not answer EVERY question we have, they at least help us frame our approach in a right way and keep us moving into the message of Scripture.

First, let's remember what we know about God. Already from the books of Genesis and Exodus, we know that God is sovereign, He's good, and He's just. He's the sort of God who speaks all of creation into existence; He makes a "very good" creation and initiates a relationship with humanity (Genesis 1-2). He's the sort of God who pursues that relationship

even after humanity rebels and sins (Genesis 12:1-3). He's the sort of God who hears the cry of His people and responds (Exodus 3:7-8). As we think about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, we need to keep this fuller picture of who God is in mind.

Second, let's remember what we know about our hearts. As we read through Exodus 7-12, it's not like God is taking Pharaoh's innocent heart and darkening it in a way that Pharaoh was resistant to. Already from the book of Exodus we've learned that Pharaoh is enslaving the Israelites (Exodus 1:8-14) and commands that Hebrew infant boys be killed (Exodus 1:15-16). So in hardening Pharaoh's heart, it's important to point out that God isn't re-directing Pharaoh, against Pharaoh's will. (Remember - these passages we just looked at show that Pharaoh's heart was already bent away from God!) One approach to this section of Scripture says this: Knowing the evil and resistance already present in Pharaoh's heart, God justly and sovereignly hardens Pharaoh's heart, and uses this as part of his larger plan to accomplish His good purposes.

If we take a step even further back, we know from the earliest pages of Genesis that our hearts as humans are turned away from God, because of our sin. In our sinful nature we have chosen to reject God and rebel against His good lordship. To read a lot more about the state of our hearts apart from Jesus, check out Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:21-23; Romans 3:10-18. As we think about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, we need to keep this fuller picture of the natural state of our hearts (including Pharaoh's heart in particular) in mind.

Third, let's remember that we're not Pharaoh. Whatever the exact situation with Pharaoh in Exodus, and however it worked itself out in real time exactly, that doesn't change the fact that everyone reading this right now is invited to respond to the saving work of God.

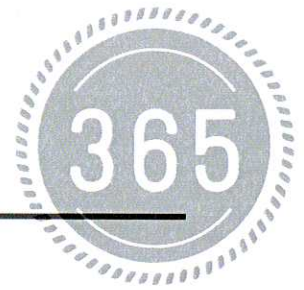
We're not just invited to respond to the saving work that God accomplished in delivering the Israelites from slavery to Egypt (though that was huge); we're invited to respond to the saving work God accomplished in delivering His people from slavery to sin through what Jesus has done for us on the cross (this is way better, and that's still putting it too mildly). This salvation replaces our own sin-polluted hearts with hearts that are new, hearts transformed to now respond to God and engage in a right relationship with Him. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul says it this way: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

Source Consulted

Philip Graham Ryken. *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*. Preaching the Word. Crossway, 2005. see especially pp. 198-202.

Kenneth J. Turner, "Exodus" in *What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About: A Survey of Jesus' Bible*, ed by Jason S. DeRouchie. Kregel Academic, 2013. see especially pp. 87-89.

Bruce K Waltke. *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*. Zondervan, 2007.



A “Crash Course” on Leviticus

January 20, 2016

I. Introduction

Leviticus can be frustrating and disorienting to read. My goal is to help us move into and through Leviticus in such a way that we (at least kinda) know what’s going on, and can benefit from the message of this book of the Bible.

II. Tips for Understanding Leviticus

A. Adjust how you read.

The big idea here is that Leviticus is going to read a lot differently than Genesis and Exodus. Genesis and Exodus have had *lots* of stories. We meet lots of people. There’s action and plot. Leviticus is a different sort of book than that. If Genesis and Exodus are more like a novel, Leviticus is more like a “how to” manual you pick up at the hardware store.

B. Keep the big picture in mind.

1. **Keep the big picture of the Bible in mind:** God is working to redeem a sinful people for Himself. God created humanity good, we sinned (and blew it), and God begins working through the family of Abraham, the nation of Israel, by initiating a promise-filled relationship with them that offers hope to the whole world. By the time we get to Leviticus, God has initiated this relationship and done a LOT to stay faithful to His promises and keep them viable. Leviticus presses “pause” on the advance of this storyline so God can show His people how they can live in right relationship with Him.
2. **Keep the main message of Leviticus in mind: Holiness.** God is holy and we are sinful. (We know that from Genesis and Exodus.) Leviticus, then, shows us *how* sinful humanity can live in covenant relationship with a holy God. That’s the bottom line we’ve got to keep in mind.

C. Process all the laws in a responsible way.

1. Approaching Old Testament laws by way of three categories:
 - a. **Ceremonial laws** - laws that govern Israelite worship

- b. **Civil laws** - laws that apply God's moral standards to the larger Israelite society as governed by an Israelite king (who himself acknowledges and submits to the authority of Yahweh)
 - c. **Moral laws** - these are laws that reflect God's own moral character and are closely connected to the 10 Commandments (personal character, relationships, sexual ethics, etc.)
- 2. Having these categories in place is valuable, because it helps us process the laws and how we should think about them today.
 - a. Israelite **ceremonial laws** point ahead to and find fulfillment in Christ (e.g. Matthew 5:17; Acts 10:9-16, 28; Hebrews 10:11-14). *How do these ceremonial laws help us appreciate the meaning and magnitude of Jesus Christ and His work for us?*
 - b. As we read the **civil laws**, we need to factor in that we live in a different time and place, and under a different form of government. *What principles can we learn from these civil laws that guide how we live in our particular time and place?*
 - c. **Moral laws** ask for continued reflection and application as we live out God's moral requirements individually and as the church - in terms of our character, our relationships, etc. *What does this mean for my own character and how I relate with others?*

III. Tips for Working Through Leviticus (Getting Practical)

As your group works through Leviticus, what are some practical, innovative ideas for making this something that people will remember and find helpful?

- A. **Check out this short video** (appx 7 min) that summarizes the book of Leviticus in a creative, helpful way: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmvyrLXoQio> (Or access it via jointhebibleproject.com >> Book Videos >> Leviticus).
- B. **Pass along a few Scripture passages** that give some perspective on all the laws. For example: Psalm 51:16-17; Matthew 22:34-40; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 9:24-28; Hebrews 10:11-14.
- C. Make a list of specific ways that reading Leviticus helps you appreciate the **meaning and magnitude of Jesus** and what He's done for us.
- D. Stay focused on **"big picture" take-aways**.
- E. **Celebrate progress**.