

I Will Harden Pharaoh's Heart  
Exodus 6:28-7:13  
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Read Exodus 6:28-7:13

*"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*  
(Hebrews 4:12)

### **Introduction: When A Heart Hardens**

My grandfather on my mom's side died of a heart attack in his early sixties. One of the elders at my last church had a massive heart attack while he was scuba diving and died at the age of 48. I have a friend in his early 40s that I played basketball with who came within days of dying because his arteries were 99% clogged and he didn't know it until the pain got so bad that he got it checked out and was immediately rushed to have double bypass open-heart surgery. The heart is the center of our bodies and when it is unhealthy, it is only a matter of time before we have massive problems. Heart disease kills over 600,000 Americans annually. Now, I am the last person you should take medical advice from, I'm just not good with medical details. But I did a little research on hearts and found out that "the cardiovascular system is one soft tissue that gets calcified very easily," according to Arjun Deb, a researcher at UCLA.<sup>1</sup> When calcium accumulates and hardens in the blood vessels, it will block them and also block blood flow to the heart. The soft tissue of the heart hardens over time and causes all kinds of issues. This researcher, Arjun Deb, and his team at UCLA have been looking at ways to prevent or reverse hardened hearts. If I could explain their research to you, I would, but just reading an article with a summary was too much for me: it had to do with fibroblasts, proteins, and experiments on mice. But their work has been applauded and other scientists have said there is enormous potential for this area of research. The article ended with the note that there is hope that we can slow, prevent, or reverse the process of calcification. The last line of the article was: "Don't lose heart."

While the Bible is not a medical textbook by any stretch, it acknowledges that hardened hearts are a fact of life. But whereas UCLA is dealing with physical hearts, the Bible is talking about our spiritual hearts. A hardened heart is symbolic of someone who does not believe or obey the God who designed and created him or her. A hardened heart has let sin block up its blood vessels so that the heart does not beat in a spiritual sense. That's why the Bible can say that we are spiritually dead, in our natural state our hearts do not beat in time with the truth. Today's passage will focus on one person whose heart was extremely hard towards God, and that affected the well-being of not just one but two different nations. Despite his being called to change and soften his heart, this man, Pharaoh, continually hardened his heart to God and His messengers. As we work through this passage and these ideas we'll see how God works on our hardened hearts and brings us to humility and repentance to soften our hearts.

Today's passage is Moses and Aaron's second visit to Pharaoh. The first time they had just asked for the people's release for a week, with no signs or plagues accompanying their visit. Pharaoh said no

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Panko, "How The Heart Hardens Biologically," from November 18, 2016 issue of Smithsonian magazine, found at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-heart-hardens-biologically-180961163/>

and made the people work harder. The visit in today's passage will be a plea for release accompanied by a sign, a miracle. The next time will be accompanied by the first of the ten plagues.

### **1) God's Renewed Calling (6:28-7:5)**

*<sup>28</sup> On the day when the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, <sup>29</sup> the Lord said to Moses, "I am the Lord; tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say to you." <sup>30</sup> But Moses said to the Lord, "Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips. How will Pharaoh listen to me?"*

*<sup>7</sup> And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. <sup>2</sup> You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. <sup>3</sup> But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, <sup>4</sup> Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. <sup>5</sup> The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them."*

Moses is still pretty hung up about anticipating that Pharaoh is not going to listen to him. And God says essentially, "Yeah, not only will he not want to listen, but I'm going to harden his heart so he can't listen! Don't worry about the results, leave the results to me. They'll happen eventually, but not because you spoke. But you're still called to speak, just be obedient." The prophet Jeremiah had a similar command in Jer. 7:27: "*So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you.*" Say what?!? What's the point of me going if my words will have zero impact and results.

Martin Luther, the great German reformer, commented on this idea: "The question is why God bids Moses preach although He Himself says: Pharaoh will not listen to you... I would refuse such an assignment from anyone and would say: Preach yourself. But the answer is: We are bidden to preach, but we are not bidden to justify people and make them pious. This thought should comfort all preachers and Christians, and everybody should pursue his calling and faithfully perform his duties."<sup>2</sup> Have you ever shared the good news of Jesus with someone and they didn't receive it? Don't feel guilty! Do your part, speak, be obedient, pray, and leave the results to the Lord.

What is one of God's purposes in stretching out His hand against Egypt and bringing His signs and wonders, which will involve pain and punishment? Verse 5 - "*The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.*" They will deny it as long as they can, but eventually it will be undeniable. Of course, God acts to make the Israelites know Him as well - Deuteronomy 4:34-35 says, "*... by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides Him.*" God does these things so that all people, friend or foe, ally or enemy, believer or unbeliever, will know who He is and what He's capable of.

This finds an echo in the New Testament, Philippians 2:10-11: "*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" Whether it is with praise and gratitude, or through clenched teeth and defiance, all people, all nations, every individual will be compelled to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, just as both God's people and God's enemies would know without a doubt that Yahweh accomplished great things in the Exodus.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, ed. Edward M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 1117.

The next seven verses show the brothers doing what God commanded and heading back to Pharaoh's court.

## 2) Moses and Aaron's Miracle (vv. 6-12)

*<sup>6</sup> Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the Lord commanded them. <sup>7</sup> Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh. <sup>8</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, <sup>9</sup> "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, "Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent." <sup>10</sup> So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. <sup>11</sup> Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. <sup>12</sup> For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.*

It's really interesting that we would expect the staff that Aaron throws down to become a snake exactly like the one back in chapter 4 when God first had Moses throw down the staff. But the Hebrew word that is used here is a little different – it's translated snake or serpent in most of the English translations, but it's actually the Hebrew word *tannin*. That word can mean "monstrous snake" or even "crocodile," and appears in Job 7:12 where it's translated as "sea monster" or "monster of the deep."<sup>3</sup> It could also just refer to a cobra; but it's not some small, harmless snake, that's for sure. What's really interesting is that in Ezekiel 29:3, God calls a later Pharaoh a *tannin* – "I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, you (*tannin*) great monster lying among your streams."

When Aaron threw the staff down in Pharaoh's presence, it was more than just to demonstrate God's power; it was a direct attack on Egypt's entire belief system and idols. And we're going to see that more as we get into the plagues. The serpent was a symbol of Egypt's strength, they had images of them all over the place – they were carved on tombs to represent immortality, they were on Pharaoh's headdress. They were both terrified and fascinated by them, and thought that if they used their likenesses they would be protected. Philip Ryken says that "to draw a modern comparison, it would be like taking a bald eagle into the Oval Office and wringing its neck. When God confronts other gods... He takes aim at His enemies' greatest strength and overwhelms it with superior force."<sup>4</sup>

We don't know exactly how Pharaoh's magicians (2 Timothy 3:8 tells us that their names were Jannes and Jambres) did what they did, but they were part of his court for a reason – they had secret arts and sleight of hand that made him feel secure. Perhaps they tapped into a demonic power that actually gave them dark spiritual abilities. 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 says, "*the activity of Satan (is) with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing...*" Of course, here Aaron's staff swallowed up their staff because God's power will always overwhelm and destroy Satan's power in the end. And we're going to see that the magicians try to keep up with Moses and Aaron's signs and plagues by replicating them for a little while, but eventually, when they can't produce gnats to explain away the 3<sup>rd</sup> plague, they are forced to admit: "*This is the finger of God*" (Exodus 8:19).

There's a message here to us as we speak God's word to the world. We can't assume that people will automatically take our word for everything we say, and when we quote the Bible and provide logical arguments for why we believe in God and Jesus as our Savior. Others will provide rational explanations for why there is no God. These court magicians are the Richard Dawkins and Sam

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<sup>3</sup> James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), p. 207.

Harris (intelligent, convincing atheists) in the story – they provide an alternate explanation to God’s miraculous wonders. They give enough of a plausible demonstration of human wisdom and might that Pharaoh is able to say, “Yeah, I don’t believe your God.” And people today can cast aside our arguments and logic and say, “These brilliant atheists have better explanations for the origins of the universe and the problem of evil and the likelihood of life after death than your religion and its so-called holy book. I’d rather listen to them.” But ultimately God’s truth will prevail no matter who believes it; Aaron’s staff swallows their staff.

The great apologist, Ravi Zacharias, who just died last month, told a story about speaking at an academy in Moscow in the 80s where he presented the case for believing in God to a room full of atheists.<sup>5</sup> He said it was very nerve-wracking, feeling attacked for 3 hours straight, but afterwards the head of the institution grabbed him and said, “Mr. Zacharias, I’m afraid that I think that you are right, but it is very difficult to change after 70 years of believing a lie.” Aaron’s staff had swallowed up his staff, but his heart was still hard. But God was working there, exposing falsehoods.

Speaking of hard hearts, this passage that we’re studying ends with something that God had already said would happen, that Pharaoh would not listen and would not believe.

### **3) Pharaoh’s Hard Heart (v. 13)**

*<sup>13</sup> Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.*

So here is where we will deal with this troubling idea of Pharaoh’s hardened heart. Pretty much everybody is OK with the way that this verse phrases things: “*Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he would not listen to them.*” Pharaoh was not open to acknowledge the power of God; he was stuck in his ways and his heart would not be moved to change or to repent. That’s pretty straightforward because we all know what it’s like to sin and become hardened to repentance. We all know that we can harden our own hearts towards spiritual things. For example, if I’m angry at the way I perceive I’ve been treated by my friend and unwilling to talk things through or pursue understanding and reconciliation, my heart is probably hard toward him and my relationship is fractured. If you have an argument with someone that doesn’t get resolved and you just don’t want to deal with them, your heart is hard towards them. Pharaoh is the same way – he doesn’t believe in Israel’s God, he doesn’t believe Moses’ words or signs, he’s prideful and stubborn. His heart is hard. So far, pretty straightforward, right?

But the difficulty comes in when it doesn’t say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but that “*God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.*” Back in verses 3-4, it said that God had actually planned to harden Pharaoh’s heart: Moses and Aaron are to speak to Pharaoh, but “*I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you.*” For the first five plagues that God sends, the text will say either that “*Pharaoh’s heart remained hard*” or “*Pharaoh hardened his heart.*” But starting with the sixth plague, the text says that “*But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them*” (Ex. 9:13), and there is some version of that for the rest of the plagues.

We’re about to do a little deep diving in theology, it’s time to wrestle with some harder stuff. (Might as well get your Bibles open to Romans when I say that!) Why doesn’t the Bible just leave it at “Pharaoh hardens his heart”? It seems extraneous that God has to involve himself in “hardening Pharaoh’s heart.” I guess to put it in a direct way: It seems unfair of God to harden someone’s heart and then hold them responsible and punish them for having that hard heart, right? There’s a really

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6aDoOzYN-U>

key phrase at the beginning of the book of Romans as Paul describes how people turned away from God by suppressing the truth about God and embracing lies: *“Therefore God gave them up.”* It actually says that phrase 3 times. It’s not exactly the same phrase as hardening Pharaoh’s heart, but it’s a similar idea. He let them go their own way. He stopped getting in their way and gave them what their hearts desired, which Romans 1 describes as futile thinking, dishonoring of their bodies, and debased minds: *“They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.”* (Romans 1:29) In other words, they were just like Pharaoh, whose heart was already hard, God gave him up, He kept his heart hard.

Later in Romans, Paul actually uses Pharaoh’s hardened heart in his exploration of God’s purposes in election, the idea that God chooses who will be saved (Romans 9:14-18): *“<sup>14</sup> What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! <sup>15</sup> For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’”* (He’s quoting Exodus 33:19) *<sup>16</sup> So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. <sup>17</sup> For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ <sup>18</sup> So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”* This is definitely not the most popular doctrine in the Bible, but it teaches us that God can bestow His grace and salvation on anyone He chooses, and He can choose not to bestow His grace and salvation on anyone. Salvation belongs to our God, it is God’s choice, He freely chooses who to save and who to leave in their sins. Now the fact that God can steer evil towards his purposes does not mean that He is causing it. Pharaoh is responsible for his own evil, just as Joseph’s brothers were responsible for their evil acts, and we are all responsible for our sins.

There’s usually a follow-up question at this point that people ask about God’s choosing, His foreordination and predestination: What if someone wants to be saved but God hasn’t chosen or elected them? I cannot answer that questions because it is a logical impossibility. It has never happened in the history of the world. Romans 3:11 says that *“no one seeks for God.”* The Bible describes our spiritual state before conversion as dead in our sins. We are enemies, we do not desire God or salvation; we reject Him, we suppress the truth that He has revealed to us. The only way that we desire salvation is when God is calling us out of darkness, the Holy Spirit is changing our hearts and softening them, giving us understanding of spiritual things, and allowing us to be responsive to God’s ways. Everybody wants to go to heaven, but if they desire it rightly, God’s way through Jesus, that is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. It’s a hard teaching, I know. At the end of John 6 when Jesus gives a statement about God choosing people: *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father,”* (v. 65) do you remember what happened? *“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.”* (v. 66)

## Conclusion

Do you know who else hardened their hearts in Exodus? The Israelites, God’s people. Psalm 95:7-11 says, *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not **harden your hearts**... For forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.’ Therefore I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”* The older generation of Israel in the wilderness could not enter the promised land, Canaan, flowing with milk and honey, because they had hardened their hearts to God!

Hebrews 3 cites that section of Scripture and then applies it to New Testament churchgoers: *“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an **evil, unbelieving heart**, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be*

*hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” (vv. 12-14).* Just because we’re not enemies of God in the way that Pharaoh was doesn’t mean that we can’t harden our hearts. Sin in your life can always cause your heart to harden. So take care, stay alert, be quick to acknowledge and repent of your sins and then change.

In Ezekiel chapters 37 there is some really striking imagery. Ezekiel comes upon a valley of dry bones that the Lord gives him a vision of, and right before his eyes, the Lord brings the whole army of them back to life. He joins their bones back together, gives them flesh, breathes life into them. It is the picture of renewed Israel, God tells him, but it’s also a picture of what happens to us in salvation. And in the previous chapter, God had said, *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”* (Ez. 36:26-27). Again, a picture of salvation. God brings us to Himself by replacing our dead hearts of stone with spiritually alive hearts of flesh. As He brings us in, we experience faith in Jesus, we humble ourselves to accept His righteousness for our sins, and we repent of our sins. And once we are saved, we still find ourselves sinning, so we continue to humble ourselves and repenting. If we don’t, we find that sin starts to calcify our hearts, and we become like the Israelites in the wilderness with hardened hearts. Beloved, keep your hearts soft to the Lord. Recognize your sins, repent often and seek the Lord’s forgiveness, renewal, and the reminder of His love. Don’t be like Pharaoh, but *“Repent, therefore, and turn back, that yours sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”* -Acts 3:19-20a. Amen.