

## GOD'S HARDENING OF PHARAOH'S HEART

God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart has been a problem for people to agonise over down through the years. In the 9th century, for example, some took a strict Augustinian line over the "three questions", as they were then called, free will, predestination, and redemption; and some took a line that made room for human involvement in salvation and supported the teaching, against Augustine, that all sinners had been redeemed by Christ. The debate was one that had been well and truly worked over by the time Erasmus and Luther took up the questions in the 16th century.

The point that received a good deal of discussion was God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart during the plagues of Egypt. The ultimate questions were: "If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he could not believe, God was responsible for Pharaoh's unbelief;" "It that was so, God could not be said to desire the salvation of all sinners;" and "If Pharaoh had no opportunity to believe, he was merely a puppet in the hands of a implacable and cynical God."

Most people are fairly familiar with the ten plagues sent on Egypt: blood, frogs, gnats, flies, disease on livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of every firstborn son in Egypt. It is true that God had told Moses before it all began, "*But I shall harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.*" However, He did not harden Pharaoh's heart from the outset. The narrative makes that very clear. When Pharaoh's sorcerers turned staffs into snakes, "*Pharaoh's heart became hard, and he would not listen*" (Ex 7:13). However, the expression, "*The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart* first occurs after the sixth plague, the boils (Ex 9:12). It then occurs five more times: Ex 10:1, before the locusts, Ex 10:20, after the locusts, Ex 10:27, after the darkness, Ex 11:10, before the death of the firstborn, and Ex 14:8, as Pharaoh pursued the Israelites towards the Red Sea. Before the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart we are told a number of times, "*his heart became hard*" (Ex 7:22); "*he hardened his heart*" (Ex 8: 15); "*Pharaoh's heart was hard*", Ex 8:15; "*Pharaoh hardened his heart*", Ex 8:31, and "*He his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go,*" Ex 9:7, the last of these after the plague on the livestock.

This is in fact a clear illustration of the truth that God hardens the hearts of those who first harden themselves. The Scriptures sometimes use the expression "*stiff-necked*", an expression that is often lost of people these days. It applied to an animal like a bullock that refused to bend its neck to a yoke when it had to pull a plough or a wagon. Spiritual stubbornness comes when God hardens people who have refused His grace. It is no proof that God in eternity made a "horrible decree" to consign a large part of human beings to damnation without a chance of salvation. The Scriptures nowhere say that God has in eternity chosen people to damnation. The passages that seem to read this way in some translations are in fact biased towards that view, and not strictly faithful to the text. For example, Christ is a stone over which people stumble, not a stone over which they are destined to stumble. In Romans 11:9 Paul calls this hardening a "*recompense*" for people's resistance and rejection of divine grace. The consequence is similar to what Paul says three times in Romans chapter one, that because of human sin God hands people over to more sin! He permits them to stew in their own juice, as it were, even in this life. Compare also Acts 7:42: "*Then God turned away, and gave them over to worship the heavenly bodies.*"

This is a warning to take the Gospel of salvation seriously. When people take offence at the message of salvation, so that, the more they hear, the more they resist the Holy Spirit, they are said to harden their hearts against divine truth. It is similar in a spiritual sense to what happens to a victim of burning or scalding. Their skin becomes callused, insensitive, or unresponsive.

There are degrees in this hardening, so that, praise God, not every case of self-hardening is beyond recovery. However, when God hands people over to obduracy, He is not the cause of their hardening. As always, the fault for people's ultimate damnation must be laid at the feet of the devil, and of sinful people themselves. It is as though God said, "You want sin and unbelief? I shall give you more sin and unbelief!" It is better not to speak about this hardening as God's cause of a person's damnation, but God's action as a judge, who permits people to go their own 'sinful way, to their own destruction. It is never prior to persistent wickedness, as it was not in the case of Pharaoh. It comes as a result of previous, voluntary, persistent wickedness.

Someone asks, "Is this the same thing as the sin against the Holy Spirit?" In the Gospels this sin seems to be a sin of speaking, which is more serious even than a sin against God the Son. Incidentally, it is an indirect confirmation of the full deity of the Holy Spirit. The enemies of Jesus, according to Matthew chapter 12, attributed what was in fact coming from "the finger of God", the Holy Spirit, (compare Lk 11:20 with Matthew 12:28) to the devil. For such a sin there is no forgiveness. Such a person is "guilty of an eternal sin" (Mk 3:29).

Some people get worried that they have been unfaithful in some point or have denied the Lord by failing to confess Him, or denied Him directly, and worry that they have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. They have to be told that the fact that they are worried is proof positive that they have not committed it. For a person who has committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, in his awful blindness, would not be worried about it. However, the answer to the question is that here casuistry breaks down. If the end result of both obduracy and the sin against the Holy Spirit is damnation, the result of both is the same. The difference is academic. May none of us be involved in either of them!

The case of Judas' betrayal is a similar case. Jesus quoted the prophecy (Ps 41:9) "*He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against Me.*" If Judas had been prophesied as the traitor, was there any hope for him? Jesus said that it would have been better for that man if he had never been born. However, right to the last Jesus kept trying to rescue Judas from the course he had set for himself. He warned him. He made statements like "*You are not all clean*", trying to touch Judas' conscience. Was God, who had prophesied this, to blame? Luke 22:3 prefaces the report about Judas' deal with the chief priests with "*Then Satan entered Judas.*" "

The Scriptural answers to the "three questions", then, must be as follows: 1) In spiritual matters sinful human beings have no free will at all. They are like donkeys ridden by the devil, who, left to themselves, can only go the way of the devil. However, this is not a necessity from which there is no escape. God is gracious and sincerely desires the salvation of every sinner. 2) However, He has, in grace, in His Son, chosen His elect to salvation before He made this world, and their salvation is sure. No one's salvation will take God by surprise. He has laid His loving choice on them and chosen them as His own. 3) Jesus Christ's sacrificial redemption from sin has been made for all sinners, even the worst of sinners. It is made available to all in the Gospel, which also invites all to receive it.

The hardening of people's hearts, as happened in the case of Pharaoh, is a sad reality, which does not negate these three important truths. All people are warned not to trifle with God's grace. People reject it, or ignore it, at the peril of their eternal salvation.

Each of us should take seriously, the warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews "*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear His voice; do not harden your hearts, as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers tested and tried Me, and saw My works for forty years. That was why I was angry with that generation, and I said: "In their hearts they are always going astray, and they have not known My ways. " So I declared on oath in My anger, "They will certainly not enter into My place of rest."*" A little later in the same chapter he writes, "*Rather, encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today', that none o/you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*" He maintains his theme into the next chapter: "*He is again appointing a certain day, 'today'. A long time afterwards, He says, through David, as has been stated above: 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts''*" (Hb 3:8, 3:15; 4:7).