

The problem of a hard heart

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 October 2022

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Now, let's turn together to Exodus chapter 7. So we've been thinking about this as a book where God makes himself known to his people and to Egypt, and we're going to see more of that today, asking ourselves the question, how do I respond to the God of all the earth?

So let's hear God's word from Exodus 7. Then the Lord said to Moses, See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs 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 divisions, my people, the Israelites, 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. Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them. Moses was 80 years old, and Aaron 83, when they spoke to Pharaoh.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, When Pharaoh says to you, Perform a miracle, then say to Aaron, Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake. So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned the wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said. Then the Lord said to Moses, Pharaoh's heart is unyielding.

He refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the river. Confront him on the bank of the Nile, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. Then say to him, The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you, Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened. This is what the Lord says, By this you will know that I am the Lord. With the staff that is in my hand, I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink. The Egyptians will not be able to drink its water. The Lord said to Moses, Tell Aaron, Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs, and they will turn to blood. Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone. Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded.

He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt. But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart became hard. He would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said. Instead, he turned and went into his palace and did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile to get drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the river. Seven days passed after the Lord struck the Nile. Amen. This is God's word for us this morning, this evening. Okay, let's pick it up. So, I guess most of us will maybe have spotted with different degrees of interest that the date for the king's coronation is now in May the 6th. Perhaps is already marked in some people's calendars. For others, maybe all we hope for it is that we might get another public holiday. And do you know when it comes to this king's coronation? That's okay.

[4 : 04] We can have different opinions about that. But our response to the king of kings, the king who we're presented with in the book of Exodus, this matters in a life and death way. So, Exodus and its missionary aim, God has been saying in so many ways, I am the Lord. And here is what I am like. He's been saying that for the benefit of Israel. He's been saying it for the benefit of Egypt and for the nations.

And one way that we're seeing this theme emerge is through two characters and two questions that have been asked. So, obviously, one of the main characters in the book of Exodus is Moses. Moses, who was called by God to be the deliverer of his people. And Moses, in chapter 3, we see him asking the question a number of times. He wants to know exactly who the Lord is. You can see that, for example, in chapter 3, verse 13. He has faith, but he's seeking understanding. He wants to be able to communicate who is God to the rest of the Israelites. But there's been another character asking another question in a very different tone. So, chapter 5, verse 2, we have Pharaoh, who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go. I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go. Here's a question based on defiance. I refuse to acknowledge the authority of this king. Okay. So, chapter 7 is going to help us to answer these two vital questions. Who is God? And that's going to take up most of our time. But then, really importantly, how do I respond? And we're going to see how Moses and Pharaoh are so very, very different. And it invites us to reflect on our own response to God. So, let's begin asking the question, who is the Lord as we find him revealed in chapter 7 of the book of Exodus. And there are at least four truths that we can identify. Let's begin by thinking about God's mighty hand. That's the language of verses 4 and 5, especially verse 4, I will lay my hand on Egypt. End of verse 5, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it. So, this strong hand, mighty hand of God used in two ways. One, against Pharaoh. And if you look at the verses, there's the language that's inviting us to think here is God as commander. He's leading Israel as army divisions out of Egypt in victory. Of course, it's God alone who has powerfully saved. Israel simply has to stand and watch. But this mighty acts of judgment that God brings on Egypt are intended to be proof to Pharaoh and to Egypt that the Lord, he is God. The one that Pharaoh is fighting against is the one true God. But the same hand that's against Pharaoh and Egypt is the same hand that is working for Israel, working to shelter Israel, working to save and to guide.

Like a father taking a child by the hand to guide his child out of danger. And this act of deliverance by God's mighty hand, too, stands as proof of who God is, both to Egypt and to Israel. So, the mighty hand of God is really significant for knowing our God. So, do we see the mighty hand of God? Where do we see the mighty hand of God? Perhaps we can begin by thinking about what we sometimes call common grace. Do we recognize every good thing that we enjoy comes from the hand of God? Do we recognize every experience of God's mercy? It's very easy for us to walk through life not thinking about where all these good things, where God's mercy comes from. There's an evangelist in the States called Randy Newman, and he writes about an apologetic of joy, by which he means one way into fruitful conversations with our non-Christian friends and family members might be to show how we have learned to show how we have learned to see God in the good things, in the simple everyday things of life, to show that God is part of everyday life. Do we see God's mighty hand in his common grace?

[8 : 45] Do we see God's mighty hand in his acts of providence? Do we have that understanding that all the events of history, all the circumstances in the story of our lives are in God's hands? With the hymn writer, can we be glad that our times are in God's hands? Because when we know that God is powerful and God is good, that God is in control and he is for his people, then there's something profoundly comforting, an invitation to trust. And then do we see God's mighty hand in his acts of salvation?

Think about the Lord Jesus as he's presented in John's Gospel. John speaks about the signs of Jesus, those miracles as signposts to the identity of Jesus that we might know that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. When we look at the cross, do we see that mighty act of God? As he pours out judgment on his Son instead of it falling on his own people. As he gives salvation by grace, as he makes a way for our sins to be forgiven. And then do we recognize in that great sign, the resurrection, that promise that sin and death has been defeated, that victory has been secured, that eternity is guaranteed for the people of God. So as we learn to see the mighty acts of God in our lives, there is a call constantly to believe and to worship and to have thankfulness. So that's one way we're invited to know our God. Secondly, we can see in this chapter much that speaks of God's total supremacy. God is in absolute charge. So one of the big themes in Exodus is this conflict theme, at least for the first 15 chapters. And the plagues, which begin here in chapter 7, come as a demonstration that I am a Lord and there is no other, there is no God besides me. Pharaoh was fighting against that. Pharaoh presumed the false gods of Egypt were equal to the God of Israel. And so chapter 7 and God's acts here show otherwise. Firstly, we see in verse 3 that

God is supreme over people. We see it there when it says, but I will harden Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh, the most powerful man of his day, but the Lord is in control. And we're going to think about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in a moment. But just to recognize that the Lord rules over the most powerful king on the planet. And that's still the case. And also God announces that he will bring his people out. He is supreme over his own people. The Lord rules over kings. The Lord rules over nations.

[11:57] We're also invited to remember that God is supreme over creation. All of the plagues are a reminder that God is the creator. God is at work. Verses 19 and 20. You can turn there and you can see that quite clearly. So here we have the river Nile, the mighty river Nile, the source of life for Egypt.

Irrigation was there. Trade happened there. Wealth was tied up with the river Nile. But also remember that it was Pharaoh who issued the decree that little baby boys should be drowned in the river Nile.

The place of life in Pharaoh's eyes was to become a place of death. And what does God do? God issues judgment, turns the place of life into the place of death. And it becomes really clear that it's God's own hand that's working this act of judgment, this plague.

Verse 20. It's as Aaron raises his staff and strikes the Nile. Instantly it's changed into blood. Now some people perhaps try and reason it away and say, well perhaps further upstream there was some sort of red clay or soil that kind of came into the water system and made its way down.

And so Moses, just in case we're thinking that, includes in verse, end of verse 19, blood will be everywhere, even in vessels of wood and stone. This is not a naturally occurring incident. This is the Lord who created, it's the Lord who is commanding.

[13:37] And we also are invited to remember, and again this has very much to do with the plagues, that the Lord is supreme over the false gods, over the false gods of Egypt. Verse 10 to 12.

And we're back with the snakes and the significance of the snakes. So remember, Pharaoh had the cobra crown. His rule was very much associated with his claim to be godlike.

Well here there is this action that happens in the palace. And what do we see? We see a battle between two powers. Incidentally, the word for snake, so when Moses performed this miracle the first time for the people of God, it was like the regular word for a snake. But this word for a snake is more similar to the word for a dragon. So we're not invited to think of just a small snake, maybe like a grass snake or a corn snake. We're invited to think of one of those huge snakes, like anaconda, boa constrictor, some kind of king cobra going on here. Because this is warfare between Pharaoh and between God. And in this contest, what happens? Aaron's staff becomes a snake, so do Pharaoh's magician's staffs, but of course Aaron's staff swallowed theirs up. There is no contest because God has no rivals. God is supreme. Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian, once said, there is no square inch of all creation over which God does not say mine. We see it here in Exodus 7.

But we also need to recognize that that includes our hearts and includes your life and includes my life. And it is so important for us to recognize the supremacy of God, the uniqueness of our God, the one who says, I am the Lord. So important for us to recognize the uniqueness of Jesus who said, I am, I am God, I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. We need to come to that point of recognizing no other God can save us. And amazingly, no other God came to save us other than the God who is revealed in the Bible.

[16:07] What else can we say about the Lord from Exodus chapter 7? We recognize one of his great goals in the Exodus is to restore relationship. So look with me at verse 16. This is what they are to say to Pharaoh. The Lord, the God of the Hebrews has sent me to say to you, let my people go so that they may worship me in the wilderness. Okay, so we're in the book of Exodus at the moment. The book before this is the book of Genesis, both books written by Moses. The book of Genesis, and especially the first 11 chapters, one of the things that we see over and over again is what we could call the spreading disease of sin. I actually ended up thinking about maybe you saw at the beginning of COVID.

Do you remember those warning videos that were all over the internet, those sort of experiments where somebody would have, I can't remember what kind of chemical it was, and then they'd be put in a room and they'd be touching the light switch and going to pick up a sandwich. They'd be opening the door and then you put the UV light on and you would see the fingerprints everywhere. And it was supposed to remind us germs from hands spread. The infection moves everywhere.

That's the point of the book of Genesis. First 11 chapters. We see sin spread from Adam and Eve to their children, then to the whole human race. Except in God's mercy, he calls Moses. He doesn't call Moses, he calls Noah and he calls Abraham. Well, we come to Exodus and we need to remember it's still within that context.

This is the reality of life during the Exodus. We are seeing in the chapters before us sinful rebellion taking place, most notably from Pharaoh and from Egypt. We see also that sin separates, and we discover that the sadness, the tragedy that the covenant people of God don't seem to know their God. We meet Pharaoh who has no desire and no will to worship God because of sin.

And we're invited to go further still and to recognize it as a picture of every human heart, to understand the spreading disease of sin in our separation from God, in our stubbornness, in our self-worship as we turn in rather than turn up. And then we hear God's grace in verse 16. God's grace in bringing freedom. And why does he bring freedom? We've said it before. He's bringing freedom not so they could enjoy a political liberation. They're enjoying freedom to become his people. They're going to experience freedom so they can know their God, so that they can worship the one true God, so they can be restored to life as it was meant to be. We were made to worship. We were made to know and to enjoy God. It's the power of the redemption theme that we find in the gospel.

We've been thinking about it so much on our Sunday mornings. The Lord Jesus, by taking on human flesh, by meeting the law's demands and perfectly obeying where we disobey, and then taking the penalty as a lawbreaker in our place, by his living as the true and better Adam, always obedient, always seeking the Father's will, by his dying as a substitute, giving his life as a sacrifice, what has he done? He has secured spiritual freedom for his people that we might know and enjoy him. Sometimes it's good for us to stop and to reflect. I found myself doing that this week. That we can worship in freedom is a massive privilege.

[20 : 12] We think about the persecuted church around the world. So many tens of millions of believers living in fear that the next time they go to a place to worship could be the last time.

So we should never take our freedom to worship for granted. That we have heard the truth of the gospel is an incredible act of God's mercy. There are billions of people described as unreached today who have never heard the good news of the Lord Jesus, who live in nations or tribes or communities where the message of Jesus has not got until this point. And so we are invited to treasure it and to do what we can to see it spread. That in Christ Jesus we are invited to freedom. That's amazing grace. Let's not fight that. Let's not ignore that. Let's not be complacent about that, but rather that we would come gladly to acknowledge Jesus as the only Redeemer. The only Redeemer we need.

Another thing that we see about the Lord here in these verses is that he is a God of judgment and mercy. And here we're back in verses 17 to 19. Again, if we pan back a little, we know that God is a holy God.

The Bible is really clear on that. And he says, be holy because I am holy. And so we know that God hates sin. And so we know that God hates the oppression that's going on in Egypt.

[22 : 03] He hates the murder of the innocents that Pharaoh has sought to bring about. He hates the injustice and the willful rejection of his name and his glory.

And so as we come to begin looking at the plagues, we can see them as a pattern. You know, the Bible talks about the wages of sin being death.

And these first nine plagues stand for us as a picture of the misery of life in a fallen world and life under the judgment of God leading up to plague 10, the plague of death.

And so the book of Exodus reminds us that God is the judge of all the earth and God will do what is right. But God also shows mercy.

God extends the invitation to mercy even to Pharaoh and to Egypt. So there's a pattern with the plagues. Sometimes we can overlook it.

[23 : 11] Do the plagues just happen? So this first plague where the Nile turns to blood. Are the people just down there one day and they're collecting the water to drink and they're going down there to bathe and then all of a sudden without any warning, the nice clear water has turned blood red?

No. They are given a fair warning. They are told. So Moses through Aaron delivers the message of God.

This is what will happen. They have an opportunity to listen. Pharaoh has the chance to do the right thing and to let God's people go.

God is not unjust. Rather like a parent or a teacher issuing a warning to a child, there is built within that the chance to change, the chance to escape those consequences.

So there is mercy. And we'll see later on in the plagues that some of the people do listen and they find mercy where others don't listen. They experience judgment. But there's absolutely mercy for Israel, isn't there?

[24 : 33] There is mercy for Israel in that they are spared, they are saved, they are taken out to enjoy covenant relationship with their God.

There is judgment and there is mercy from the hand of God. The Bible tells us of God's eternal plan of salvation.

Such a mystery to that. We're told that the Father and the Son and the Spirit established the plan of salvation before the world was ever made. Sometimes it's called the covenant of redemption.

And in that covenant of redemption, God by His grace freely chooses to save some guilty sinners by sending His Son, the Lord Jesus, and by sending the Spirit so that some will respond in faith.

And then in the fullness of God's timing, the Son of God came into the world and He was made subject to the law. And He paid the ransom price for sin and for sinners on the cross.

[25 : 35] And He rose again in victory and vindication. So that, by faith in Christ Jesus, there will be no judgment on us for our sin.

There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Instead, trusting in Jesus, we experience God's mercy, the mercy of being reconciled to God, the mercy of being adopted into the family of God, the mercy of being established in this covenant relationship with God.

And so, Jesus speaks in the Gospel and He says, come to Me. Trust in Me as Lord and as Savior. So this is the Lord. This is the Lord of the mighty hand. This is the Lord who is supreme over all.

The Lord who restores relationship.

The Lord of judgment and mercy. This is the Lord. Now, the question is, how do you and I respond to the Lord? To think about chapters 5 to 7 together for a moment, we can think about them as a crossroads moment.

[26 : 52] We know what we mean when we talk about a moment of crossroads, you know, for driving. There's two roads and we have to make a decision and the decision that we make will set the direction for the rest of the journey. Well, for Moses and Pharaoh, rather, they find themselves at a crossroads.

There is a point of decision for them as to how they will respond to God. And we will see two very different responses. Today, for us, whenever we hear God's Word, whenever we hear the Gospel, we find ourselves again at a crossroads.

Am I going to obey or to disobey what I hear today? Am I going to trust or am I going to doubt God's promise today?

Am I going to receive or am I going to reject Jesus the Savior today? There are crossroads moments every time we read and we hear God's Word.

So let's consider what happens with Pharaoh and with Moses so that we might learn from them.

First of all, let's think about stubborn, hard-hearted Pharaoh.

[28 : 07] And we're invited to think of him that way because it's a recurring theme in chapter 7. Verse 3, I will harden Pharaoh's heart. Verse 13, Pharaoh's heart became hard.

Verse 22, Pharaoh's heart became hard. Verse 23, he did not even take this to heart. I read a study this week looking at the power of choices and the way that choices made repeatedly at a certain point create fixed habits and can even create addictions.

So the study was all focused on our phones. apparently the average phone user is making 2,000 touches to their phone every day.

And so this study was saying it's little wonder then that we find our eyes and our minds being drawn towards our phone. They take our attention and they can set our behavior.

Choices can create fixed habits. That study was saying, well, what do we see in Pharaoh? We see a fixed choice from him to say no to God at every point.

[29 : 30] In verse 3, he is stubborn and hard-hearted towards God's words. And we're told that again in verse 14.

Having seen God's greater glory with the snakes at the palace, he is hard-hearted towards God's power and God's rule. And even as the first plague appears with its threat of judgment, Pharaoh hardens his heart to that also.

Pharaoh wants to enter into war with God. Even as it becomes clear to everyone around him this is a battle he cannot win. The story of Pharaoh's hard heart is told from two different points of view. And I think it's helpful for us to recognize that. So let's just think about that just very briefly. The Bible absolutely presents Pharaoh as someone who is making his own moral choices.

He is freely, deliberately choosing to say no to God, to turn his back on God, and he has been acting deliberately to try and destroy and make life miserable for the people of God.

[30 : 54] But we also are invited to see it from the Lord's point of view. And what we discover there, verse 3, the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, we are invited to recognize the Lord is the moral ruler over Pharaoh, over everybody.

And so the Lord has a right to pass judgment on Pharaoh. The Lord in his wisdom decides when Pharaoh reaches the point of no return, when his rejection of God has become a fixed habit, and so what the Lord does is to give him up to his desire.

And what will become clear for us as the chapters go on is that one reason behind that is so that God's glory will be seen all the more clearly.

God could have acted instantly to transform Pharaoh's heart, could have acted with such force that Pharaoh would instantly have let the people go, but by God's design, he was giving a repeated lesson to Israel and to Egypt, I am the Lord and there is no other.

And so there is a hardening towards that end. God asked Moses to write three times about Pharaoh's hard heart.

[32 : 27] Surely as a warning, perhaps to himself, absolutely to the people of Israel, remember Pharaoh, remember what happens if you harden your heart to God.

Also, it's included for us, isn't it? Don't harden our hearts to the biblical warnings that we find throughout Scripture. The warning that sin is real and judgment is real, that eternal punishment in hell is real, that we cannot presume on the mercy of God, and we shouldn't harden our hearts to our God and our Saviour.

The Puritans used to say that the same sun that melts the ice, also hardens the clay. Every time we hear the Word of God, some people's hearts are made soft, and some people's hearts are hardened.

We're being invited to see from the example of Pharaoh, don't resist God's Son, don't resist the light and the life that he brings. Rather, that we would be like obedient Moses.

He's like the flip side, he's the picture of the soft heart. So since chapter 3, if you've been with us, we've seen the Lord has been calling Moses, he's been revealing more of himself to Moses, he's been making promises and issuing commands, and Moses up until this point, we've seen him feel of self-doubt, we've seen him aware of his own failures, we've seen some of his fears come out, but Moses has reached a crossroads as well.

[34 : 09] Very simple verse, 7 verse 6, Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them. And Moses from this point, this is what we'll see.

We're going to see him walk with God in faith and obedience. We're going to see a newfound confidence in the Lord. We're going to see that he's confident that he has God's word.

Now, his identity isn't all about himself. Oh, I failed in the past, oh, I feel so terrible, I'm a nobody. Now his identity is rooted in God.

He knows he's sent by God, he knows he's come to speak God's words, he's going to do what God says and God's going to be with him. So he becomes this model of faith and obedience and he becomes a model of faith and obedience for us as well.

That we are invited also to trust the promises that we find in the Bible, to trust the promise of a Lord who saves, of a Lord who watches over his people, a Lord who promises to be with us, who promises to supply all we need, who will continue what he started in his work of salvation, who will help us in times of trial and temptation.

[35 : 35] So as we find ourselves today, under the word of God, a cross road in our lives, what path will we choose?

Let's choose the path that Moses chose. Choose the path of faith and obedience. Let's choose to follow the Lord. Let's pray together.

Lord, we thank you that you are a God who reveals yourself to us in your word in so many different ways, to encourage us towards faith and obedience.

Lord, we recognise so much of ourselves, love and you get on to what do on toicio things. Hold on, walk one along.

Eastern Highway forward, we smash one of ce hard, have worked ahead of someone who will come to his heart down,emon treasury and faith and■■ across believe oh, you know, his life is amazing, that he ok?