

Harden Not Your Heart

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Preacher: Keith Knowlton

[0 : 0 0] Well, from my perspective, the hardest part of the sermon is over. I made it through those names, I think, fairly well. I can't guarantee the accuracy of the pronunciations. But if you're anything like me, when you come to a genealogy in Scripture, it's my temptation to just kind of skip over it, right?

Because we may not know how to pronounce those names. We don't know who those people are. We don't know the significance of the genealogy. And so we kind of just move ourselves forward. And interesting, someplace in the Bible where there's genealogies, it makes sense where they are.

At the very beginning of Matthew, there's this genealogy that leads up to the birth of Jesus that makes sense to us. After the creation story, we see this genealogy that tells us of man as they multiply on this earth.

But in our passage today, we see this genealogy seemingly pop out of nowhere. It seems like it's kind of randomly placed smack dab in the middle of this text. I wonder if any of you are familiar with the American artist named Bob Ross.

He passed away a number of years ago. He had this TV show in the States that spanned decades. I don't know if it was popular here in the U.K. But he was a guy.

[1 : 1 0] He just had this big hair. He was very soft-spoken. And it was a 30-minute TV show, very low production value, where he's in this dark room with an easel and a canvas and his palette of paint, and he just talks you through this painting that he's doing over the course of his show.

And whether you're into art or not, this would just mesmerize people. I remember as a child watching this and just seeing him, his tone of his voice, and you hear the tapping of the paintbrush on the canvas, and you just sit still and you watch this masterpiece come together.

But it was interesting. Almost in every single one of his paintings, there's a point in time where you're like, no, don't do that. Because he'd paint these beautiful backgrounds first, this scene of mountains or lakes, and then he'd start working on the foreground.

And oftentimes he'd paint these big black lines right down the middle of his painting, and you think, what are you doing? You're destroying your art. And then he'd explain this is actually going to be a tree or trees, and he finishes the finer details, and he recognizes how that fits together.

That works. That's creating this masterpiece. It makes sense. And I think we can find it kind of the same way about this genealogy. We wonder, why in the world is it placed smack dab in this narrative that's kind of reaching this climax?

[2 : 2 2] It seems to be a bad decision. And so I think it's important for us to ask, why is it placed here? What does this have to do with the Israelites in slavery? And then when we answer those questions, I think we begin to see the beauty of it in the place and where it sits in this narrative.

And so that's what I want us to focus on this morning. I want us to consider, first of all, how this genealogy illustrates for us God's sovereign plan. And then secondly, as we move into chapter 7, to consider man's response to this plan.

So just two points, God's plan and our response. So let's consider God's plan. I think as we think of this genealogy, it's important to think about the cultural context in which this passage was written.

In ancient times, a lineage would be something that was really important, that would hold great significance, particularly to the people of Israel. Maybe some of us have dabbled with some of those websites like genealogy.com or others where you can kind of figure out your own genealogy and people in your family tree.

But I would dare say there's probably not many of us here could even name their great-grandparents. But in this day and age, we see this genealogy being very important.

[3 : 38] And it's interesting also that this is a rather incomplete genealogy. It's rather selective in who it names. Because while genealogy can be important for historical purposes, this is important for theological purposes.

It's placed here in this passage because it shows us how God is shaping his people and the events of this world in order to accomplish his purposes. And so if we go back to the beginning of Genesis, we encounter this man named Abram who God comes to.

A pagan man, not worthy of God's attention or affection, but God chooses to bless him. And he changes his name to Abraham and said that he, through him, his family is going to be great and that all nations will be blessed through him.

But just a few chapters later in Genesis, we see also that God says that his descendants are actually going to become slaves in a foreign land. And that God will bring judgment on that nation and bring this people of Abraham, this people known as the Israelites, out of that land with great possession.

And so this promise that was made to Abraham is not simply for Abraham, but also for his descendants. The Israelites would have known of this promise.

[4 : 54] And that's why they would have cried out to God for deliverance. And so this genealogy, it connects the past to the present, tracing the reality of God's sovereignty and grace.

And so that's why it makes sense that it's in the middle of this narrative to remind the people of Israel of God's covenant promise to them, that they are a part of a family, that they are a part of a tribe and a nation that has been ordained by God.

And it's interesting that this specifically highlights the priestly line of Aaron. Aaron is from the tribe of Levi. It is the Levites who will be the priests in the years to come.

And so that's all the more important when we think about what Aaron and Moses have been called to do here, to go before Pharaoh, to enter into this crucial conflict, to request the release of their people.

So I think I might have mentioned this before, but when I was in uni, I played rugby, and I had a part of a really good team. Even though rugby is not hugely popular in the States, it was a big deal at my school.

[6 : 01] And one of the reasons for the success of our program was because of our coach. He was a great coach at teaching the sport. He was great at kind of creating a game plan, but also at motivation.

And so before games, especially toward the end of the year when we were in tournament play, I remember he'd have a circle around him on the pitch, and he'd give us this motivational speech, and he'd point to each one of us in the name of our university on our kit.

And he'd say, that name means something. That name means excellence. That name means aggression. You do not play for yourself, but you play for this team and this program and for every player who has gone before you.

He wanted us to recognize our identity as players of this program who had won three national championships in a row in just years prior.

And so that makes sense here. What God is doing here, he's reminding Aaron, he's reminding the people of Israel of their own role, their own calling as God's people.

[7 : 06] Aaron specifically, this priestly heritage and identity he has, his identity being rooted in God is going to enable him to speak God's words to Pharaoh. And so you may expect then that after this genealogy, being in the middle of this passage, okay, that's going to change Moses and Aaron's attitude, right?

They were reluctant at first. This genealogy is inserted here, so we're going to see a change of attitude for them. They're going to go forth with great boldness and confidence. Not so much.

God commands Moses to tell Pharaoh all that he's told him, just like he did earlier in the chapter, and Moses again exhibits his self-doubt. Me? I'm not a good public speaker.

How is Pharaoh going to listen to me? The people of Israel didn't even listen to me. And it's a credit to Moses, who's the author of this book, that he doesn't try to paint himself as falsely as some hero here, because he repeatedly shows himself to be reluctant and to be nervous and to be doubtful.

But it's actually in Moses' weakness that emphasizes to us all the more the deliverance comes from Christ alone. It is God who made a promise.

[8 : 18] It is God who has a plan. It is God who has the power to save his people. And so that brings us then to point number two. If this is God's plan that's revealed through his genealogy, that has been told to Moses and his people, this is how I will rescue you, how does man respond?

Well, as we move forward in chapter 7, in the next few chapters of Exodus, it really focuses in on two men, Moses being one and Pharaoh being the other. And we see these two men, they act very differently in response to God's plan.

And so I want us to consider Pharaoh's response first, and then I want us to consider Moses' response. So how does Pharaoh respond to this plan? It's resistance.

It's rejection, right? Look at verse 2 again. 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. Now think about my rugby program again. If my coach before the game, he gives us the strategy, this is what we're going to do.

[9 : 29] We're going to be aggressive in the backs, or in scrum. We're going to spin the ball out in the backs. But you know what? Even if we stick to our game plan, if we do all this stuff, it's likely not going to work for us.

You think, Well, that's a horrible game plan then. Like think of a new game plan that's actually going to work that's going to give us some sort of motivation here. But we see here that even though Moses is told, You're not going to be able to convince Moses, or you're not going to be able to convince Pharaoh, this is still the plan for success, because success would actually come through God hardening Pharaoh's heart.

And I think this can be a point in the scripture where we can become really confused or actually really angry at God and his will here.

Because we can ask the question, How is it fair that God would judge Pharaoh when he's controlling Pharaoh's actions? It's almost as if Pharaoh's like, it looks like he's a puppet on a string.

And God's going to bring him to judgment without ever giving him the choice of what he can do if he's hardening his heart. But I think even though this is kind of difficult for us to wrap our heads around, I think we can say confidently that God is not actively working evil in the heart of Pharaoh.

[10 : 40] God is not the source of evil. Pharaoh's heart was already hard. Just like your heart and my heart, we came into this world hard-hearted people.

We see this actually throughout the book of Exodus early on. This proves that he was this evil tyrant. He ordered ethnic cleansing. He was killing firstborn sons. He was working his slaves to death. He was treating the Israelites as subhuman.

And so this hardening of heart, I think it's worth thinking about what it means in this context. Because oftentimes now when we think of this word hardening hearts, it means someone who lacks compassion or is cruel, they're hard-hearted.

That's not what it means here in this context. When God is talking about hardening Pharaoh's heart, it means that he's conveying a sense of being determined or resolute in purpose.

And so Pharaoh's heart is being strengthened toward his evil agenda. He's being allowed to be steadfast and unchanging in his rejection of God. And so to say that God is hardening Pharaoh's heart doesn't mean that he's forcing Pharaoh to act against his will.

[11 : 50] Quite the opposite. God is withholding his restraining grace, giving Pharaoh the boldness to pursue the pathway that he so desires. It's not like Pharaoh longed to submit to God, but he wasn't allowed to do so.

He was given countless opportunities over and over again, these signs and these plagues. Every single time he rejects God. We see in this passage, Aaron throws his rod on the ground and it becomes a serpent.

Does that impress Pharaoh? No. His own magicians do the same thing. Aaron's staff swallows up their staff. Is he impressed? Still not impressed. With every plague and sign to follow, we see Pharaoh still not impressed.

His heart still hardened. No change comes. And so it's like we see concrete when it begins to harden. At some point, there's just, it cannot make, you can't make any impression upon that concrete anymore because it becomes so hard.

And we see the effect of this hardening in verse 4 and verse 17. It says his heart was hardened and he would not listen. A hardened heart makes him hard of hearing.

[13 : 07] And this is true not just for Pharaoh, but this is true for you and me as well. We sang this in Psalm 95 earlier. It says today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

Certainly at all times in our life, we've probably faced this temptation, right? To try to close God out for some reason. We don't want him involved in our life.

We don't want to hear what he has to say. We want to deal with things our own way. Many of you know that my family and I moved here from the States and I practiced law for a number of years there and I loved what I did and I loved who I worked with.

But we started to sense this calling that God was putting on our lives. And the temptation for us was to refuse that calling, to kind of close our ears off to that calling, to not even want to spend time in the word or in prayer out of fear of what he may tell us to do.

We were tempted to just kind of enclose ourselves off in this bubble of comfort and success and ignore the voice of God. Maybe we've experienced similar things yourself.

[14 : 16] Maybe it's been tragedy in your life and you're left asking God, why? Why would you allow this to happen? And we're left maybe questioning God's love for us or maybe questioning whether God even cares.

And so we start to shut down. We don't want to hear from God because why in the world would we want to hear from a God who doesn't seem to care for us at all? Maybe we see this in relationships.

Maybe there's been a relationship that's been in turmoil, that there's been conflict with you and another and you're no longer friends with that person. And in fact, you have withheld forgiveness from that person. Maybe even the thought of that person makes your blood boil a little bit.

And as that develops in our own hearts, we refuse to listen to God's own voice who tells us and reminds us of His forgiveness and grace in our lives that we should also extend to others.

Maybe it's a secret sin in our life. Maybe rather than try to fight and expose the sin, we just want to feed it secretly.

[15 : 30] Maybe we try to compartmentalize our lives around it and rather than expose it, rather than listen to God's call of purity and repentance, we just grow harder and harder of heart.

It's a horrible thing to allow our hearts to become hard that we fail to hear the voice of God. Ultimately, in this passage, we see the purpose for Pharaoh's hardened heart in verses 4 and 5.

Moses is told that Pharaoh's not going to listen to you and that I will lay my hand on Egypt with mighty acts of judgment. I will bring out my divisions, my people of Israel. It says, the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.

Why does God harden Pharaoh's heart? So that Pharaoh and all of Egypt will know who God is. The first time that Moses goes to Pharaoh in Exodus chapter 5 and he tells him who God, who this Yahweh is and what he's supposed to do, Pharaoh says, who is Yahweh?

And why would I listen to him? But through these signs, through these plagues that are to come, we see that Pharaoh will come to know the power and the authority of the one true God.

[16 : 57] And as we read on, Pharaoh's heart becomes brittle and it does break, but it only breaks through the knowledge of that God that comes through the judgment of God. And so the same is true for us.

If we are hard-hearted, if we fail to listen to God, there will come a day of judgment when our hearts will be broken.

God warns this through the prophet Jeremiah. He says, is not my word like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces? There will come a day when God will break the heart of every rebel.

But the thing is, at that point of judgment, it will be too late for any of us to listen. But we see in this passage there is an alternative. Though Pharaoh rejects the plan of God, we see Moses do something quite different.

And again, it's easy to put Moses on a pedestal, to think that he's the hero in this passage and in this book. But if we look back to the beginning of Exodus, we see over and over again that it's not just Pharaoh who's hard-hearted, but it's also Moses who is hard-hearted.

[18 : 07] We see multiple examples of Moses being a coward. He's a murderer. He's a blasphemer. He lacks faith. He continues to question God. And yet God extends his mercy to Moses.

And as a result, his heart is softened. And we see this play out elsewhere in the Old Testament. If we go to the book of Ezekiel, the people of Israel are no longer captive in Egypt.

They're held captive by the Babylonians. And this is what God says through the prophet Ezekiel to his people. He says, 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.

Does this not describe exactly what happens to Moses? This is exactly what God can do for us. When we think about the softening of our own hearts, this is not something that we can do on our own if we just try harder or try to be better to think God will accept us, to think we're some means of softening our hearts toward God.

[19 : 21] Our hearts are softened when we receive the mercy of our generous forgiving God. It is he alone who can transform our hearts. And so we see the effect of this transformation in Moses' life.

He begins to listen and he begins to obey. Verses 6 and verses 10. Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them. So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded.

We see this pattern that begins to repeat over and over again in the book of Exodus. It says, the Lord said to Moses and Moses did as he commanded. And it's really interesting.

I think it's important that it actually includes Moses' age here and the age of Aaron. It says, Moses is 80 years old when he goes to Pharaoh. Aaron is 83 years old. And so does this not give us hope?

It took Moses 80 years for his heart to be softened, to become sensitive and tender to the things of the Lord. Is there not hope for each one of us? When we recognize our rebellious hearts, when we recognize the path of sin that we have lived, that we have a God who is willing to forgive and extend his mercy to us that we may receive his mercy.

[20 : 39] And so you think, no, I've been apart from God for too long. I've done too much to earn his shame. No, you haven't. I've done too many bad things in my life.

I have too many skeletons in my closet. No, you don't. You are never too far from the mercy of God. You are never too far from the mercy of God. But you know what?

It's not ultimately Moses who's our example in this passage. Because if we turn to the book of Hebrews, this is what we read earlier in chapter 3. It says, While Moses was faithful in God's house, Jesus was counted worthy of more glory than Moses.

For while Moses was faithful as a servant, Jesus was faithful as a son. And so as we look back at our passage, this is not just some moral lesson to teach ourselves to be soft-hearted.

I don't want to simply encourage you to see what you can glean from the life of Moses, but rather to look at to who Moses' life points.

[21 : 44] Because a soft heart is a believing heart. And so the encouragement for us, the call for each one of us as we listen to the voice of God is to believe that God's saving plan that was promised to Abraham, that was claimed by Moses, has found his fulfillment in Jesus, God's son.

It's Jesus who's the better Moses, who's the true high priest who came to earth to deliver his people from the slavery of sin through the shedding of his blood on the cross.

It is only through his sacrifice that we can receive God's mercy. It is by grace through faith in what Christ has done that our hearts can be softened.

And so the reality of the situation is, is just like Pharaoh and just like Moses, we are all hard-hearted. And we can either choose to refuse God's plan or we can accept it.

And so know this, God's mercy has been extended to you. God's mercy has been extended to you.

[23 : 01] And so the invitation for each one of us is to receive this gift of grace through faith in the completed work of Jesus. And maybe this is the first time you have heard this message and the Lord is softening your heart even now.

Praise the Lord. But maybe you've heard this message before. Maybe you have come to the Lord in faith and your heart has been softened. But recognize this gift of mercy is not a one-time gift.

His mercies are new every morning. And we still are tempted to allow our hearts to be hardened. And so recognize with His mercy our lives are to be transformed.

Our identity is to be found in Christ. And so may we learn to hear His voice and to obey His will. knowing that we serve a loving and powerful God whose plans will always be accomplished.

Hear His voice and harden not your heart. His love