

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart has become a point of contention among Christians for centuries. At the center of the debate is the question of whether or not Pharaoh had a choice in the matter or if he was merely a pawn whom God established to be used in a display of His power. Oftentimes this particular subject opens up the debate between Calvinists and Arminians;<sup>1</sup> however, a thorough examination of that subject is far beyond the scope of this paper. While the topic must necessarily be breached, it is important to stay focused on the particular issue of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

R. A. Torrey described the importance of this issue:

The various statements that are made in the Scriptures in regard to God hardening Pharaoh's heart have also perplexed a great many young Christians and have frequently been made use of

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<sup>1</sup> Following Norman Geisler's example in *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), this paper will make a distinction between the so-called hyper-Calvinist position (herein entitled extreme Calvinist), the moderate Calvinist position (those who agree with a moderate interpretation of the five points of Calvinism), and the Arminian position (not including the extreme Arminian view - also known as Open Theism). Although numerous Christians would actually fall somewhere in between these positions, it is necessary to categorize certain positions for the purposes of this research paper.

by unbelievers in their attacks upon the Bible. It is said that if God hardened Pharaoh's heart and, in consequence of this hardening, Pharaoh rebelled against God, then God Himself was responsible for Pharaoh's sin, and it was unjust to hold Pharaoh accountable for his rebellion and to punish him for it.<sup>2</sup>

While this description may seem too simplistic for the serious student of Scripture, nevertheless it is entirely accurate. If God did not give Pharaoh a chance to obey His command, then how could God justify His condemnation of Pharaoh's actions? On the other hand, how can one claim that Pharaoh had a choice when the Bible clearly states that God hardened Pharaoh's heart? This apparent contradiction can be reconciled when one examines all the information given in the Bible on this topic.

In Exodus 4:21, God told Moses, "...I will harden his [Pharaoh's] heart, so that he will not let the people go." Later, in Exodus 7:3, God reminded Moses, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt." These two promises were fulfilled following God's sixth judgment on Egypt, the plague of boils. Exodus 9:12 states that "the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh."

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<sup>2</sup> Torrey, R.A. *Difficulties in the Bible: Alleged Errors and Contradictions*. (Willow Grove: Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, 1998) chapter 8.

Scholars of both Calvinist and Arminian persuasions are in agreement over the above verses; however, it is what takes place in between the LORD's prophecy and it's fulfillment that is at the center of the controversy. That is, did Pharaoh have a genuine opportunity to free the Israelites and save himself from a divine hardening of the heart or did God force Pharaoh to deny freedom to the slaves in order to demonstrate His power to the world?

If these were the only relevant verses to the topic then it would be easy to side with the extreme Calvinist position and claim that Pharaoh had no choice in the matter.<sup>3</sup> However, there are numerous relevant verses that need to be examined before reaching a decision in this matter. The Bible mentions the condition of Pharaoh's heart following the description of each of the first nine plagues. A brief overview of these descriptions provides information crucial to this subject.

Following the first plague when the water was turned to blood, Exodus 7: 22 states that "Pharaoh's heart grew

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<sup>3</sup> The extreme Calvinist denies that any person has free will because they see this as a violation of God's sovereignty. While many who hold this position would claim that they do believe in free will, it is an undeniable logical outworking of their theology to deny it. Arthur W. Pink summarizes this position, "None are thus 'willing' till He has put forth His all-mighty power and wrought a miracle of grace in the heart." Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, Trade paperback edition (Grand Rapids, MI: 2000) p. 129.

hard." Verse 23 declares that Pharaoh's heart was not "moved by this." After the second plague, "when Pharaoh saw that there was relief [from the frogs], he hardened his heart" (Ex. 8: 15). At the conclusion of the plague of flies, "Pharaoh's heart grew hard" (Ex. 8: 19). Following the plague on the livestock, the Bible again states, "the heart of Pharaoh became hard" (Ex. 9: 7).

It is not until after the sixth plague that God's prophecy in Exodus 4: 21 was clearly fulfilled. It is at this point that for the first time the Bible specifically stated, "the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh" (Ex. 9: 12). This is significant because it appears that God may have given Pharaoh at least five chances to free the Israelites and avoid divine judgment.

At this point, it is important to describe the possible solutions to this dilemma.<sup>4</sup> First, Pharaoh did not have free will but was only behaving as he was predestined to do.<sup>5</sup> Second, Pharaoh had free will throughout the entire

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<sup>4</sup> God's ways and thoughts are higher than man's ways or thoughts (Is.55: 9). It may not be possible for man to ever fully understand this complex situation; however, it is recorded in Holy Writ so man is obligated to search for a solution to the best of his abilities.

<sup>5</sup> This is the extreme Calvinist position. Pink claims that "God did this 'in order to show forth His power in him' (Rom. 9:17); in other words, it was just as easy for Him to overthrow this haughty and powerful monarch as it was for Him to crush a worm." He goes on to say that God "reserves

ordeal, as the Arminian position would claim. Third, the moderate Calvinist would claim that Pharaoh was able to make a decision to obey God or to disobey God. Since he repeatedly chose to disobey God, in spite of so many miracles, God merely confirmed his unbelief by hardening his heart following the sixth plague.

From a superficial reading of the Exodus account, it would appear that the extreme Calvinist position enjoys the greatest amount of support. However, the first principle in biblical hermeneutics is to let "Scripture interpret Scripture." This dictum was "one of Calvin's most significant contributions to hermeneutics."<sup>6</sup> The Synthesis Principle, also known as *analogia scriptura*, states that since one Scripture cannot contradict another these interpretations of the text must be compared and contrasted with other passages in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> When this is done the extreme Calvinist interpretation of this passage creates numerous difficulties. Norman Geisler explained:

There appears to be a serious problem here for God's love and justice. If God loves everyone, then why did he harden Pharaoh's heart

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to Himself the right to act as He pleases." *The Sovereignty of God*, p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Newman, "The Scandal of Reason - Part 1: A Response to Post-Modern Evangelicalism," *Conservative Theological Journal*, 1 (December 1997): 265.

<sup>7</sup> John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing Group, 1997) p. xxi.

so he would reject God's will? If God is just, why blame Pharaoh for his sin when it was God who hardened his heart to sin?<sup>8</sup>

If the God of the Bible is truly a God of love and justice, then the extreme Calvinist interpretation of this passage cannot be correct. A just judge cannot blame a man for something he was forced to do and had no control over. In the same way, God could not justly judge Pharaoh for his unbelief if Pharaoh had no control over it. Likewise, if God simply created Pharaoh so that He could crush him then He would not be an all-loving God.<sup>9</sup>

Geisler summarized the extreme Calvinist position by stating, "*Hence, extreme Calvinism is in practice a denial of the omnibenevolence of God.*"<sup>10</sup> This may appear to be an overly harsh statement but it is the logical conclusion of the extreme Calvinist position. Just as the extreme Arminian errs by overemphasizing God's love and man's free

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<sup>8</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999) p. 591.

<sup>9</sup> Some extreme Calvinists have attempted to circumvent this problem by claiming that God is all-loving but does not love everyone. Charles Spurgeon stated "We do not know why God has purposed to save some and not others....We cannot say why his love to all men is not the same as his love to the elect." Cited by Iain Murray in *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching*, 117. However, this maneuver is simply illogical. A God who is all-loving must love all. To predestine a person for reprobation is entirely contradictory to the nature of a loving God.

<sup>10</sup> Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, pp. 88-89. Italics in the original.

will, the extreme Calvinist errs by overemphasizing God's sovereignty and predestination. A correct view of God must include a balance of His attributes.

The fact that God is sovereign does not change the situation at all. The doctrine of God's sovereignty states that in His omnipotence, God has complete control over His creation. However, just because God is an all-powerful Being does not mean that He cannot do anything. For example, God cannot do the self-contradictory or the impossible, such as lie (Heb. 6: 18 or change His mind (1 Sam. 15: 29)).<sup>11</sup> He can only do all things that are possible.<sup>12</sup> Since God is also just and loving, it would be contradictory for Him to go against His nature. Therefore, He cannot create people, like Pharaoh, for the purpose of showing His power by condemning him for something he had no control of. This would certainly be unloving and unjust.

The Arminian view must also be examined in light of Scripture. This position affirms that man has been given free will and claims that God would not or could not ever violate that. Therefore, God could not harden Pharaoh's heart. This position fails for the obvious reason that the

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<sup>11</sup> Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume One* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2002) p. 92.

Bible clearly states on numerous occasions that God would and did harden Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4: 21; 9: 12).

The moderate Calvinist position seemingly makes the most sense of all the data given in Scripture. Following the second and fourth plagues, it is abundantly clear that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 8: 15, 32). This is extremely strong evidence that Pharaoh did indeed have a choice in the matter at this stage of the drama.

This fact brings up another dilemma: God had already told Moses that He was going to harden Pharaoh's heart before Pharaoh actually hardened his own heart. The moderate Calvinist position again makes sense of this seemingly difficult problem. Since God is eternal and omniscient He knew exactly how Pharaoh was going to respond to the plagues before they ever started.<sup>13</sup> Even though God knew how Pharaoh would act, He still gave him the opportunity to release the Israelites. At some point God had had enough of Pharaoh's backpedaling and hardness of heart so God hardened Pharaoh's heart. He confirmed Pharaoh's unbelief, in accordance with his own free will, and from that point on it was impossible for Pharaoh to

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<sup>13</sup> Because He is eternal, God is not limited by time in any sense. This goes hand in hand with His omniscience. Contrary to the extreme Arminian (open theist), the entire future is knowable for God because, in a sense, He is already there.

repent. God did not violate Pharaoh's free will by hardening his heart. He merely strengthened Pharaoh's resolve to do what he had already chosen to do.<sup>14</sup> This seems to be the only way in which God could remain just.

In accordance with the Synthesis Principle, it is necessary to examine other passages of Scripture to see if this interpretation is consistent with the entirety of Scripture. Two questions must be answered for the moderate Calvinist position to be tenable. First, does the Bible teach that God gives every person an opportunity to repent and call upon His name for salvation? Second, will a loving God eventually harden an obstinate person's heart so that he is beyond the point of repentance? If these two questions can be answered in the affirmative, then the moderate Calvinist view of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is consistent with other biblical teachings.

There is abundant support for answering the first question in the affirmative. Three well-known verses will suffice to support this point. Perhaps the clearest verse on this issue came from the Apostle Peter. He stated that the Lord "is not willing that any should perish but that

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<sup>14</sup> G.K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9," *Trinity Theological Journal*, 5 (Spring 1984): 143.

all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3: 9). The Apostle John affirmed, "God so loved the world" (John 3: 16).

Finally, the Apostle Paul told his young protégé, Timothy that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2: 4). These verses speak for themselves. God loves the world so much that He gave His only Son so that all people would have the chance to come to repentance.

Many extreme Calvinists attempt to force an unnatural interpretation on these verses by claiming that these verses merely refer to the elect.<sup>15</sup> There is no scriptural support for this maneuver. This is a classical example of eisegesis, the practice of reading one's own position into the text rather than letting the text speak for itself.

The second question must now be dealt with. Will a God of love eventually harden a person's heart so that he or she goes beyond the point of repentance? Before answering that question it will be beneficial to examine another biblical figure that may have fit this description. Judas Iscariot walked and talked with Jesus during His earthly ministry. He witnessed countless miracles and heard the word of God proclaimed, from the Son of God

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<sup>15</sup> Dave Hunt, *What Love is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God* (Sisters, OR: Loyal Publishing, 2002) p. 197.

Himself, on a daily basis. Yet Judas was never converted. He was a thief (John 12: 6) and a false convert and eventually his heart was so hard that Satan actually entered him (John 13: 27). At this point he was willing to betray Christ. Judas felt extreme sorrow for what he had done but apparently he could not repent and be saved so he hanged himself (Matt. 27: 5). Jesus said that it would have been better if his betrayer had never been born (Matt. 26: 24). This is a clear reference to the fact that Judas will not be in heaven.

The Book of Hebrews has several relevant passages to this study. Hebrews 10: 26 states "For if we sin willfully after we have received a knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." The author of Hebrews is not referring to a Christian in this verse because it is impossible for a believer to lose his or her salvation.<sup>16</sup> It appears that the author is referring to someone who had enough understanding of God to make the decision to trust in Him; however for one reason or another he willfully rejected the offer of salvation. At this

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<sup>16</sup> The doctrine of eternal security is extremely well established in Scripture. Romans 8 was written to support this fact. Paul concludes this chapter by stating that nothing in all of creation can separate the believer from God (Rom. 8: 38 - 39).

point God hardens the heart of the individual so that they can never receive salvation.

This idea will become clear from a closer examination of a similar passage in the same book. Hebrews 6: 4 - 6 states:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

A careful study of the phrases in this passage reveals that the author is not referring to a person who has lost salvation, which is impossible. Instead it points to a person who, like Judas and Pharaoh, hardened his heart after God gave him numerous opportunities to repent. The Bible tells us that Jesus enlightened all men (John 1: 9). Judas certainly "tasted the heavenly gift," partook of the Holy Spirit, and "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." He walked with the Son of God throughout His ministry and received numerous blessings for his participation. He saw the Holy Spirit at work in Christ's life and ministry and heard God's word proclaimed on a regular basis. Yet Judas never truly believed.

These verses declare that an individual who still rejects God after being given such an abundant amount of evidence will eventually lose his opportunity for salvation. As he continually hardens his heart against God's goodness and mercy, God will eventually give him over to his own desires. At some point He will harden his heart and it will be too late for him to ever repent.

A similar concept is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. During the end times there will be people who will not "receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (2 The. 2: 10). Paul tells them that because of this "God will send them strong delusion that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 The. 2: 11 - 12). It must be emphasized that those who will be deluded are those who willfully will not "receive the love of the truth" (v. 10). These people will be given a sufficient number of opportunities to repent and finally God will confirm their unbelief by hardening their hearts.

This perfectly fits the pattern recorded in Exodus concerning Pharaoh. Pharaoh was given numerous signs of God's power and mercy in the plagues sent upon the land of Egypt. Each time that Pharaoh hardened his heart he came

one step closer to "passing the point of no return spiritually, of losing forever the opportunity of salvation."<sup>17</sup> Eventually he crossed that point and "the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh" (Ex. 9: 12).

This type of situation is similar to committing the unpardonable sin of "blasphemy against the Spirit" (Matt. 12: 31). The Pharisees had seen the works of Jesus and knew that He was doing God's work. In their selfish pride, they refused to acknowledge that Jesus was sent from God and actually accused Him of working for Beelzebub (Matt. 12: 24). Judas, Pharaoh, and the hypothetical person mentioned in Hebrews 6 are all guilty of a similar sin. They had enough knowledge of God and had experienced His goodness yet they still rejected Him. While this is not specifically called "the unpardonable sin" it comes close and the results are the same. Eventually, this person's unbelief will cause him to forever turn his back on God.<sup>18</sup>

God desires that everyone would be saved. He has given everyone a chance to accept Him or reject Him; however, He will not keep His offer of salvation on the table forever. If an enlightened person continues in unbelief he will eventually lose his opportunity to be

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<sup>17</sup> John F. MacArthur, *Saved Without a Doubt* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

saved. These teachings line up with the moderate Calvinist interpretation of Scripture but completely refute the extreme Calvinist and the Arminian views. The moderate Calvinist position has passed the test of the Synthesis Principle and is therefore the most likely solution to the problem of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

In Romans 9: 17 Paul quoted Exodus 9: 14, which states that Pharaoh was raised to his position of power so that God would be glorified through a demonstration of His power. At first glance, this appears to be a watertight argument in favor of the extreme Calvinist viewpoint; however, this interpretation contradicts numerous verses stating that God desires everyone to be saved, such as 2 Peter 3: 9. God knew that Pharaoh would reject Him so He simply worked through Pharaoh's hard heart to bring glory to His name. Pharaoh had a genuine opportunity to accept God's grace but he rejected it and in turn, God rejected Pharaoh for all eternity. Once again, this matches the moderate Calvinist interpretation.

Christians have debated this topic throughout history. This is due, in large part, to the fact that man simply cannot fully understand God's ways and thoughts. A believer should take caution against holding a dogmatic stance on any particular interpretation.