

Did God make Pharaoh sin?

BY ANDY HASTINGS

In Exodus 4:21 we read, “And the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. *But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.*”

But in James 1:13-15 we have this statement, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God;’ for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”

James wrote that God does not make people sin; Moses said God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so he would not do what God told him to do. How do we reconcile these two passages? Does the Bible contradict itself? Did God harden Pharaoh’s heart by suspending Pharaoh’s free will, or did Pharaoh have a choice?

We might start by asking why God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. In Exodus 9:13-16 we read, “Then the Lord said to Moses, Rise early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh, and say to him, Thus says the Lord God of the Hebrews: Let My people go, that they may serve Me, or at this time I will send all My plagues to your very heart, and on your servants and on your people, that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth. Now if I had stretched out My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, then you would have been cut off from the earth. But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.”

Pharaoh was raised up so God’s people and the people of the world would see the power of Jehovah. The ten plagues that eventually came on Egypt came because of Pharaoh’s stubbornness. Was this the only way God’s power could have been shown to the world? Or, were there other options?

In Esther 4:14 we see that God can work his will in the world no matter which direction we personally decide to take, “For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance *will arise for the Jews from another place*, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

God had an agenda to accomplish, and Esther was a part of that plan. But if she did not have the courage to do the necessary thing, God would have used another way. Whether we are obedient, or rebellious, God will use us to fulfill His ultimate goal. Think of Judas Iscariot who betrayed the Christ to the Romans. He did the wrong thing, personally, but was instrumental in bringing about what the world needed.

Pharaoh was the ruler of the most powerful nation on the earth at that time. Consider if he would have provided for Moses a protected escort for the Jews to leave Egypt and worship their God. Do you think the world would have taken notice of that? Would the world have been shown the great power of Jehovah if Pharaoh would have obeyed the God of the Hebrews? God still used Pharaoh despite his rebellion, but in a much different way.

So, was God able to harden Pharaoh's heart without forcing him to sin against his will? In Exodus 5:2 Pharaoh shows us the **precondition** of his heart, "*And Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go.*"

Pharaoh did not care one thing about the will of the Creator. If anything was going to be done, it was going to be done his way. After all, Pharaoh was considered a god himself; who was this "god of slaves" to tell him what to do?

Matthew 13:18-23 gives us the parable of the sower, which illustrates how different hearts react to the word of God, "*Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.*"

Whether Pharaoh obeyed or rebelled, God was going to use him to accomplish His goal. The following illustration helps put all of this together and shows how the same word of God can affect the righteous (Moses) one way and the wicked (Pharaoh) in a completely different way, causing a very different reaction from each.



WAX
(Moses)

Melts when it comes into contact with the flame (God) and then softens and conforms to any mold that might be placed around it (God's word)



FIRE
(God)

Gave instructions to both Moses and Pharaoh (each were supplied with adequate evidence that the message was from God)



CLAY
(Pharaoh)

When potter's clay is placed in the oven and exposed to the flame (God), the clay hardens to its current shape and conforms no more

We need to be careful to keep the condition of our spiritual heart moldable, like Moses, so that when we are exposed to the truth of God's word, no matter how difficult it may be for us to comply, we comply. Likewise, we need to guard against it becoming like that of Pharaoh's heart so that when it is exposed to the word of God it hardens and does not conform because of our preconceived ideas of what we think the Bible "ought" to say, or resist God because of our selfish desires or lazy indifference.

What is your heart condition today?