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INTRODUCTION

The various statements in Scripture that speak of God hardening men's hearts have not only been used by unbelievers in their attacks on the Bible, they have frequently perplexed a great number of young Christians.

They have drawn conclusions, that if God predetermines everything in our lives, then man's free will does not really exist and so he can no longer be held accountable for his actions.

Such teaching is not only contrary to other passages of Scripture, it is also very dangerous, because it discourages people from fighting evil and doing good.

In the following chapters, we will give an introduction to some of these misunderstood Bible passages and demonstrate how, when interpreted in their context, all misunderstandings connected to them immediately disappear.

PHARAOH GETS HIS HEART'S DESIRE

Our first Scripture passage that speaks of God hardening man's heart is found in the Book of Exodus. Moses wrote:

And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power, but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."

(Exodus 4:21-22)

It is argued that if God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and the result was Pharaoh rebelling against Him, then God Himself was responsible for his sin. In that case, how could it be just to hold Pharaoh accountable for his rebellion, and to punish him for it. Paul's treatise on the subject in the Book of Romans is often quoted to add further proof to this conclusion. We read:

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens whomever he chooses.

(Romans 9:17-19)

Certainly, if God were to take a man who really desired to know and do His will and harden his heart and thus incline him to disobey, it would indeed be impossible to justify the Lord's actions.

But when we examine this incident more carefully, we find this is not at all what the Lord did with Pharaoh.

Pharaoh was not a man who desired to obey God. The whole account in Exodus begins by telling us this leader was a cruel tyrant, subjecting the people of Israel to cruel slavery, suffering and death, even before Moses went before him.

And when Moses did go before him, to demand he let the Israelites go, in rebellion, Pharaoh defied God's orders and subjected the people to even worse bondage and oppression. It was only after this that God began to harden his heart.

And, contrary to what the critics say, Paul's commentary on the subject in Romans bears witness to this fact, not to the opposite. Let us examine what the Apostle goes on to say, breaking it down, piece by piece. He continues:

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"

(Romans 9:19)

First, the argument Paul is refuting in this verse is not a correct interpretation of what he had just said, but the natural man's interpretation of it. Paul's question in this verse is similar to that in Romans chapter six where he said, "*What shall we say then? shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?*"

The Apostle knew someone would interpret his teaching on grace to be an excuse to sin, so he spoke their wrong conclusion and then refuted it. He does the exact same thing here. He states an abusive interpretation of his statement and then proceeds to counter it:

But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?

(Romans 9:20-22)

As no man would deny a potter his right to decide how he uses his own clay, neither should we deny the Lord the same sovereign right to manage the affairs of His own Creation as He sees fit. Paul goes on:

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory – including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

(Romans 9:22-25)

Again, some have interpreted this passage to say that the Lord creates some people evil and predestined to a life of damnation, not by *their* choice, but by God’s. But this is not consistent with other doctrines or examples in Scripture. Ezekiel writes:

I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.

(Ezekiel 33:11)

This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

(1 Timothy 2:3-5)

The Lord does not create certain individuals for destruction. Yet some do become reprobate by their own choice. But instead of just removing them from the world, the Lord endures “*with much patience*” their evil doings.

He may even put them in great positions of authority, which is exactly what He did with Pharaoh, so that He can manifest His great power through His victory over them and their wicked devices. Or there are times when He will use their tyranny to discipline nations and peoples under them.

There is a passage of Scripture in the Old Testament Book of Jeremiah which further proves the point we have made above. Paul may have drawn his illustration of the potter and his clay from this passage. Here we read that God sent the Prophet Jeremiah to the potter’s house to learn a lesson. The Lord spoke to him and said:

Come down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words. So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

(Jeremiah 18:2-5)

Then the Word of the Lord came again to Jeremiah:

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

(Jeremiah 18:6-7)

The message here is clear. Jeremiah learned two things from the example of the potter. First, that although his vessel was ruined, through no fault of his own, he could still refashion it and put it to good use.

Second, Jeremiah learned that God would do the same with His people, and relent His plans of judgement against them if they would heed His warning and repent. The Lord then goes on to extend this same promise to everyone:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.

(Jeremiah 18:6-10)

God says that when He purposes evil against a nation and that nation repents, then He will change His plans for them. This undeniably states that man has a choice and that his choice influences God's choice.

To summarize our main point in this chapter, God did not make Pharaoh the stubborn and rebellious man he was, but He used the way Pharaoh had chosen to be of his own free will to display His power and glory. Since Pharaoh had already hardened his heart towards God, God was not unjust in continuing to harden his heart further until His glory was manifest completely.

Beyond the Point of Rescue

It is also useful to underline that God's dealing with Pharaoh has always been His method of dealing with mankind. That is, if an individual wilfully continues to reject conscience and choose error, then he will at last be given over to his heart's desire. Paul writes:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.

(Romans 1:28)

The King James Version says "*reprobate mind*," instead of "*debased mind*." The Greek word translated reprobate is *adokimos*. The term means undiscerning and void of right judgement. In this passage from Romans it can be understood as "an abominable mind, a mind to be abhorred by God and man."

In the Bible, this describes the state of a person who is totally rejected by God and beyond the hope of salvation. Paul also applied the term reprobate to Christians who had renounced their faith in Christ.

As the context in this passage from Romans explains, God has revealed Himself to every person who ever lived. Yet there comes a time when His Spirit will strive with man no longer!

All Doubts Removed

If there is any difficulty that still remains in this incident with Pharaoh, it all disappears when we consider the manner in which God hardened his heart. So many people miss this, but it is very important, especially when seeking to understand similar passages of Scripture.

In hardening Pharaoh's heart, God did not use force or coercion. The way in which God hardened Pharaoh's heart was by sending to him a series of demonstrations of His existence, nature and power, and a series of judgements against his sin.

If Pharaoh had humbled himself and taken the right attitude toward these revelations of God's existence and of the just judgements that God sent upon him, it would have led to his repentance and salvation. And yet, by willingly and wilfully taking the wrong attitude toward them, he was hardened by them! This is exactly what the Apostle Paul says elsewhere:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

(2 Corinthians 2:15-17)

Here Paul says the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ has two different effects upon two different kinds of people. For those who reject the Gospel of Christ, they actually go from bad to worse. But to those that receive the message, it brings even more blessing than they already had.

Dear reader, this applies also to you. There is nothing that God sends upon a person that is more merciful than the judgements He sends upon our rebellion and sin. If we take this discipline with a humble attitude, it will lead to repentance and entire surrender to God, and thus bring life and power. However, if we rebel against it, it will harden our hearts even more and bring us eternal ruin:

*For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation
and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.*

(2 Corinthians 6:10-11)

DON'T CONFUSE ME WITH THE FACTS

Another portion of Scripture used to teach God deliberately hardens man's heart is found in the Book of Isaiah and quoted by the Apostle John. He wrote:

Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him.

(John 12:38-42)

Taken out of context, it does appear God deliberately blinded the eyes and hardened the hearts of the Jews so they could not receive Jesus. As we will see, this is not true.

First, that the Messiah would have to come twice – the first time to be rejected and killed, and the second time to reign as King and rule – was clearly displayed all over the Old Testament Scriptures for anyone with eyes to see.

Second, Jesus spoke plainly to them on several occasions about His identity and mission and how He was fulfilling Messianic prophecy before their eyes. He even told them He said certain things so that they might believe and be saved (*John 5:34*).

And on one occasion He wept because of their unbelief and the judgement that would befall them because of it. In other words, He did everything He could to help them believe!

So what did harden their hearts? The same thing that hardened Pharaoh's heart – a manifestation of God's true nature and glory! In the Old Testament, the phrase, "*arm of the Lord*," is a metaphor for God's mighty power to save and deliver His people. We read:

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord.

(Isaiah 51:9)

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

(Isaiah 52:10)

Where is the one who put within them his holy Spirit, who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses.

(Isaiah 63:12)

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

(Psalm 98:1)

The whole life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest manifestation of the "*arm of the Lord*" ever seen, yet the majority refused to believe. Therefore, it was their own sinful refusal to let go of their pre-determined interpretation of who the Messiah would be and what He came to do that hardened their hearts and blinded their eyes.

As one commentator perfectly put it, “What does man not see, or fail to see, when it serves to establish his own favourite opinions.” Their attitude could be summed up with the famous statement, “Don’t confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up.”

Of course, there are other reasons why the religious leaders of Jesus’ day refused to believe God’s plan of salvation clearly displayed in the Law and Prophets.

For one, to accept Jesus as Messiah would mean letting go of all their previously held beliefs and admitting they had erred in their understanding. For the self-righteous, that would be unthinkable!

But Even the Disciples Doubted

Yes, we are told that also Jesus’ Disciples could not fully grasp the idea of a God-Man, crucified Messiah. Mark tells us:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

(Mark 9:30-33)

Again, further on in the Gospel of Mark we read:

They understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what he said.

(Luke 18:34-35)

Here too, at first glance, one might be tempted to think it was God who hid the truth from His Disciples. But as we stated, Jesus spoke plainly to them on several occasions about His identity and mission. And after the resurrection the Lord rebuked them and called them foolish for not understanding and believing what the Prophets had clearly said.

So why were they not fully convinced? They too wanted a human and military Messiah; one that would part the Red Sea and drown all the Romans in the midst of it!

That is what they expected and their hearts were hardened to anything else. Peter tried to prevent it, and was sharply rebuked for his carnal ambitions. Judas was so enraged by the idea that he took the situation into his own hands.

The fact that the Apostles wanted Jesus to immediately establish a physical kingdom, where they would reign with Him in political power, becomes even more evident when we read that each time Jesus spoke of His coming Passion, they would argue about who was the greatest among them! Sometimes we are forced to blush for human nature.

Lessons to Learn Here too

In all this we learn a few important truths still relevant to each one of us today. The first is recognizing our total dependence on revelation from the Holy Spirit. Even the most advanced spiritually are still students when it comes to understanding God's Word, even though everything therein is clear and simple.

Many of the religious Jews and even Jesus' Disciples were negligent in this area. However, God took advantage of their negligence and worked it into His perfect plan. We are told in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus waited until *after* the resurrection to open "*their minds to understand the Scriptures.*"

The reason for this is obvious. If the Jews had not rejected Jesus and crucified Him, there would be salvation for neither Jew nor Gentile:

So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles.

(Romans II:II)

Finally, we must not allow our preconceived ideas or our pride to stand in the way of our progress towards perfection. These are deadly enemies that must be put down immediately. We ought to have the attitude of little children in this regard.

BORN TO BE LOST?

Various Scriptures say believers in Christ were chosen and destined in Him for salvation before the foundation of the world. For instance, the Apostle Paul writes:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

(Romans 8:29)

Critics have also interpreted this doctrine as further proof that God predetermines everything in an individual's life, including whether he will be lost or saved. But as we stated in chapter one, this idea is not consistent with other doctrines or examples in Scripture.

It is also a very dangerous notion, because it would discourage people from fighting evil and doing good. One would reason that if God predetermines everything that happens in his life, then everything that happens to him and everything he does is God's will.

That being said, even some newcomers to the Christian faith have had difficulty in reconciling God's foreordination with man's freedom of choice.

This difficulty can be easily resolved. The passage of Scripture from Romans quoted above actually provides the key for unlocking the answer to the doctrine of predestination.

Predestination is dependent on foreknowledge. The word *foreknowledge* simply refers to God knowing who would accept His offer of salvation in advance of them actually doing it.

Practically the same explanation applies to the following portions of Scripture, that are also frequently used to discredit the Bible's integrity. Our first example reads:

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord, and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers.

(Acts 13:48-49)

Again, when we read this passage we are tempted to think the Word of God teaches some are born to be lost. But as stated, God knew before the foundation of the world what each person will do; whether he will yield to the Holy Spirit and accept Christ, or whether he will resist the Spirit and reject Christ.

Those who receive Him are destined for eternal life. But if any are lost, it is simply because they will not come to Christ “*to have life.*” “*Whoever desires may come,*” and “*anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.*” Our second example is found in the following passage from the Book of Acts:

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.

(Acts 2:23-24)

Despite what some believe, this does not mean that these men were not perfectly free in their choice. They did not do as they did because God preordained it. This simply means that in His foreknowledge God knew that Judas and the rest who betrayed Jesus and put Him to death would act that way, so He took their actions into His plan and made them a part of it.

Give Them the Gospel Anyway!

Some Christians have taken these passages to mean it would be a waste of time bringing the Gospel to those who are not predestined, and so before going out to evangelize they pray God will lead them only to those who will receive Jesus. But this does not harmonize with what Paul says in the Scripture passage below:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

(2 Corinthians 2:15-17)

Here Paul says the Gospel has two different effects upon two different kinds of people – those who reject it and those who receive it – making it clear that we are to preach the Gospel to everyone.

Finally, it is not a waste of time to bring the Good News to those who will not receive it, because it is through your witness that on Judgement Day they will discover why they were not predestined!