

Text: Exodus 9:8-12

Title: "When the Lord hardens a heart"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: *Coronavirus* is a term few of us knew a year ago. Now it is a word that is hard to avoid day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute. I am told that a virus is called a *coronavirus* when it has crown-like structures protruding from its surface. I am sure that by now few of us could even say that we have never seen a picture of a coronavirus. It too is everywhere.

I am also told that there are seven different coronaviruses that have been known since the 1960s to affect humans. The last three, including the Covid-19 we are dealing with today, are unique in that they began in animals and mutated to infect humans. While we laymen think of the coronavirus as just one kind of disease, there are a number of different coronaviruses, each with its own characteristics and issues. A medical professional who desires to help sick people needs to be familiar with these specific differences.

The ten plagues are a bit like that. As we study the ten plagues together, one by one, we can be tempted with the thought that these are all the same – that if you have heard a message about one plague you have heard a message about them all. I hope, however, that one of the things we have learned as we have studied the plagues together is that this is not the case at all. Each plague has its own unique characteristics, which are important for us to understand if we want to invite God's work of deliverance into our lives. Just like a medical professional needs to delve into the details of different coronaviruses to help a patient, we need to carefully examine the special characteristics of each plague God

sends on Egypt if we are to understand the power of His ability to judge sin and to save us from its bondage.

We have come to the sixth of the ten plagues. Note some of its unique features:

- Like the third plague, the sixth plague comes with no additional warning to Pharaoh. The Lord does not guarantee that we will hear His warnings again. Once should be enough. Pharaoh had heard four. How many have we?
- The sixth plague is a miraculous conversion of furnace soot into blistering skin infections on man and beast (vv. 8-10). It may be that the furnace used was one in which Hebrew slaves had made their bricks of bondage. Whereas the fifth plague was the first to destroy the possessions of the Egyptians, this sixth is the first to destroy their health. I am reminded of Job's experiences, which were similar. What God's people have in common with those who know not the Lord is that we all can and ultimately will face loss of possessions and loss of health. What is different is that Job had grace to face these problems, which he received by trusting in the Lord. With possessions gone and boils from head to toe, he said, "For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:25-26). None in Egypt knew what Job knew.
- The sixth plague puts an end not only to the magician's tricks, but also to their ability to even appear before Moses in Pharaoh's court (v. 11). Their exalted status in Egyptian society could not save them from the common effects of the plague. No matter who we think we are, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). We are in the same boat spiritually. The Lord warns through Jeremiah, "Speak, Thus saith the Lord, Even the carcasses of men shall fall as dung upon the open field, and as the handful after the harvest-

man, and none shall gather them. Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord" (Jer. 9:22-24). As we contemplate the accomplishments of men and women, do we remember to ask, "But did they understand and know the Lord?"

But perhaps the most terrifying unique characteristic of the sixth plague is what we read in verse 12: "And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh." This plague is the first during which the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart. I do not normally think of the God whom we worship, love, and trust as Savior as the God who hardens hearts, but that simply means that I need to grow in my ability to glory in the true understanding and knowledge of God. He exercises lovingkindness, but also judgment and righteousness in the earth. I am comfortable with the first of these, but fearful of the other two. It is in the spirit of that fear that I want our focus to be what happens "when the Lord hardens a heart."

I. When the Lord hardens a heart, it is a heart that is hardened already (9:7).

Illustration: Last February Dallas, Tx got their own "Leaning Tower of Dallas" when some of the demolition explosives designed to take down the Affiliated Computer Services tower failed to go off, leaving the core of the building still standing and leaning like an American version of the "Leaning Tower of Pisa." The demolished building finally came completely down after repeated hits with a wrecking ball, which then finally made the area safe once again and cleared the way for work on a new building.

Application: There is much I shall fail to understand about what happens when God hardens a heart, but one thing is very clear from our study of the plagues of Exodus thus far, which is that when God hardens a heart, it is a heart that is already very hard. Pharaoh repeatedly hardens his own heart before the Lord does, and then again afterwards. This work of God seems to me to be somewhat analogous to the demolition of a building, which is already a wreck because of the damage done to it over many years. Now finally the wrecking ball has come to finalize demolition of the building in such a way that it can no longer be a threat to others or in the way of something new in its place.

The life of the sinner is like a self-destroying building. With each response of unbelief before the truth of God's Word, he hardens his heart and crumbles some more. Finally, when beyond any hope of repair, God may step in and finish the job. Whenever God hardens the human heart, He is hardening something already hardened, something made hard by its own repeated rejections of God's truth in unbelief during the days of His work of forbearance.

How is your heart? Is it hardened? If so, it may be that God has hardened it, but understand this morning that He did so only because you first hardened it yourself. Where those of us who live with a hardened heart can find hope is only one place - the truth of Heb. 9:27, "It is appointed unto man once to die, and *after this* the judgment." Ultimate irreversible judgment comes only after death. God has given us, even those of us that He has hardened, the breath of life today, which is more of His goodness designed to lead us to repentance before it is eternally too late (Rom. 2:4).

II. When the Lord hardens a heart, it is a heart that deserves to be hardened (Rom. 9:15-18).

Illustration: The radio talk-show host, Dave Ramsey, gives financial advice that has helped many people. I have heard him while in the car on some of my long trips to see my dad, and I have been impressed by the way he often greets his listeners who call in. When they ask him, "How are you doing?" He says, "Better than I deserve." What he is referring to, of course, is the mercy and compassion Paul is speaking of in this passage (Rom. 9:15).

Application: Paul refers to Pharaoh as the one who received the opposite of this mercy, God's hardening (v. 18). The opposite of God's hardening is His mercy. Well, what is God's mercy? Mercy is not getting what we deserve as sinners who have broken the holy law of God. We deserve condemnation. The opposite of mercy is getting what we do deserve, and the opposite of mercy is God's hardening. Therefore, God's hardening is getting what each of us does deserve.

As I stand before you here today, I no more deserve to have a heart softened by God's grace than Pharaoh did. It is only by God's compassion and mercy that I am different than he was. It would have been fair for me to have been hardened just like him. By nature, I am Pharaoh – arrogant, selfish, lustful, malicious, and ignorant. The Bible tells me that my heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9).

But as Paul says, God has compassion and mercy on whom He wants to have compassion and mercy. As we read further in the chapter, we find not only that He does not want to have mercy on the one who wills the hardest or who runs the best (v. 16), but also we find that He wants to have mercy on the one who simply receives forgiveness by faith, not works (vv. 30-33). God has mercy on those who believe, who simply trust His promise to save them through the atoning death of Christ on the cross for them. Do you have saving faith to receive God's mercy? We deserve to be hardened.

III. When the Lord hardens a heart, it is a heart that fulfills God's Word (v. 12).

Illustration: When Jesus died on the cross, what Satan thought was his greatest victory was his ultimate defeat. The serpent enjoyed biting the heel of Eve's descendant, but while being bitten the heel of the Lord pressed down, crushing the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). As Christ hung on the cross, those who had Him crucified while denying that He was the prophesied One fulfilled prophecy with their cruel mocking and casting lots for His garments. The Henderson hymn put it well, "To the cross our Lord was nailed and with each blow the darkness failed." The darkness wielded the hammer, and yet failed with each cruel blow.

Application: Even so in this passage, Pharaoh refuses to believe and submit to the Word of God to the point that God is moved to harden him in judgment, and in doing so Pharaoh confirms the Word God had spoken to Moses in earlier passages (4:21, 7:3). God is not threatened by the hard heart of human unbelief; His Word is confirmed by the very ones who claim it is not true (Rom. 3:3-4a, "For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar."). The unbelief of man can make God's Word untrue no more than my failure to believe that my mother-in-law's car is parked behind mine can make it go away. Reality hits.

IV. When the Lord hardens a heart, it is a heart that sins the sin for which the Lord would die (v. 12).

Application: After the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh does not listen to Moses and Aaron. That refusal to listen is Pharaoh's sin. Honestly for me, this is where this work of God becomes something beyond my understanding. It seems to my limited understanding as though God causes

Pharaoh to sin in such a way that it becomes difficult to hold Pharaoh responsible for that sin. Two other considerations have helped me a bit with my lack of understanding.

First, there is the promise that God does not tempt to evil (Jam. 1:13), which combined with Paul's reflections on the exodus in 1 Corinthians 10 helps me to conclude that even when God hardens a heart, there is still that promised way of escape spoken of in 1 Cor. 10:13 waiting for him. God always provides an exodus, a way out. God will harden Pharaoh again before He is done with the ten plagues. It is as though the hardening here after the sixth plague is something less than permanent, something repeated.

Second, I remember that although the Scripture speaks of God's blinding the eye of the sinner, closing his ear, and hardening his heart, we are also told that Satan does something very similar: "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:4; see also John 15:22-25). It would seem that when God hardens a sinner, it is best to say that He is allowing the god of this world to have his desired effect.

However we may try to understand the relationship between God's work of hardening a heart and the subsequent sin of that heart, I am certain about one thing regarding Pharaoh's sin. That sin would someday be placed on Jesus Christ, whose death would provide a propitiation for that sin (1 John 2:2, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." Isa. 53:6, "All we like sheep

have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”).

Conclusion: Perhaps you are here this morning with a heart that the Lord has hardened. Only you can know your own heart that way. If that is you, I must confess that there is much I do not understand about the Lord’s dealings with you. But this much I do know - I can assure you, that Jesus Christ died for your sins because God loves you and wants you to be saved. I can assure you that God’s forbearance is holding back irreversible ultimate righteous judgment upon you until after you die. And I can assure you that God’s promise to save you today is still true, in spite of the hardness of your unbelief. There is still time to repent of your hard heart and to ask the Lord to soften it and save you in Christ. Why not turn from the blinding unbelief caused by the god of this world and be saved by faith in Christ today?

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*