Exodus 9:12; Romans 9:19-24 *Glad You Asked: Hard Hearts*

***Questions***Today we are starting a new series. We’re calling it “Glad You Asked.” The idea is to tackle some of the hard questions that people who regularly attend church are asking.

Asking questions is an important part of our faith. It is God who created us, God who gave us minds to think and reason, and so I think God wants us to be intellectually curious. I think God wants us to dig into the scriptures, and make observations about the world He created, in order to deepen our understanding about Him. I don’t think God is afraid of our hard questions. And so, I don’t want to be afraid of hard questions either.

And I wanted to make sure I was really answering questions that you are asking. So we created a submission form on our website—**www.spencerhope.com/questions/--**where you could anonymously submit questions to be considered for this series. The link is still active, and I still haven’t chosen questions for the last two weeks, so if you have a question you want to submit you still can. I do, however, have plenty of questions to choose from.

All in all, we had about 20 questions submitted. Some were on similar topics and so I tried to group them together. Some were more appropriate for an entire series than for a single sermon. Some were just kind of fun.

For example, one question that got submitted more than once (I’m not sure if it came from the same person or if multiple people are wondering about it) had to do with angels singing. It’s an interesting little bit of Bible trivia that the Bible never actually says that angels sing. We have Christmas Carols that say “Hark! The Herald Angles Sing” and “Angels we have heard on high/sweetly singing o’er the plains;” but the Bible itself, when it describes the heavenly host that announced the birth of Jesus, doesn’t use the word sing. **Luke 2:13-14**:

**13**Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

**14**“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
    and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

It sounds like a song, but the Bible word is very clearly “saying” not “singing.” And the word singing is never used about angels anywhere else. That doesn’t mean that angels never sing, and I don’t think it makes a big difference in our understanding of God one way or another, but it is an interesting bit of Bible trivia. Like I said, that’s a fun question.

But some of the questions (most of the questions) were much harder than that. **Like this one**, for instance:

In the Bible it mentions God hardening someone’s heart... why does he do that?

That’s a tough question, and a good one. Someone with a hard heart is someone who is far from God. The Biblical imagery is such that someone who is hard-hearted is closed off from God, unable to have a relationship with Him. But if the Bible says that God makes someone’s heart hard, then is God deciding in advance that that person cannot have a relationship with Him? Has God destined that person for destruction? Is that fair?

***Pharaoh, Pharaoh***The pre-eminent example of this is, of course, Pharaoh in the Old Testament story of the Exodus. When God sends Moses to demand that the Israelites be freed from slavery, it is Pharaoh who must make the decision of whether or not to let the people go. Pharaoh doesn’t want to—his nation’s entire economy is pretty much built on this free labor source—and so God sends a series of 10 plagues. And throughout the story of those plagues, as Pharaoh refuses again and again to let the people go, the Bible keeps making reference to Pharaoh’s hard heart. In fact, at least 20 times between Exodus 4 and Exodus 14 reference is made to the hard condition of Pharaoh’s heart

What is interesting is that in half of those references, Pharaoh’s hardness of heart is described as something that happened to him, or something he caused himself. For example, in **Exodus 7:13**, right after Aaron’s staff swallows the staffs of the Egyptian magicians, it says:

**13**Yet Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

And in **chapter 8:15**, right after the plague of frogs ends it says:

**15**But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said.

In these verses, it would appear that Pharaoh’s hard heart is something he chose for himself.

But, in the other half of those references, God Himself is said to have hardened Pharaoh’s heart. So, for example, in **Exodus 4:21**, when God sends Moses back to Egypt He predicts:

“When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.”

And **Exodus 10:1**, just before the plague of locusts, God says:

“Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them.”

In these verses, it would appear that Pharaoh’s hard heart is something that God chose for him.

So, the question I want us to consider today is: Who made Pharaoh’s heart hard? How do we understand these verses, and what does God want us to learn through them?

***Resistance to God***The first possible answer is to say that **Pharaoh’s heart was hard because he hardened it**. Pharaoh resisted God. He opposed God. As a result, he found himself on the wrong side of God.

We have already seen this in Exodus 8:15. Let me give you a couple more examples, such as **Exodus 8:19**. This is right after the third plague, the plague of gnats, which is the first plague the magicians are unable to duplicate:

**19**the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said.

This is what it means to have a hard heart: to not listen. The heart in the Bible is often portrayed as the seat of understanding, feeling, and decision making. A “hard heart” implies a callousness to instruction or a resistance to someone else’s leading. When someone’s heart is hard towards God there is an implication of arrogance: as though the person believes him or herself to be above God’s rule.

Clearly, as long a person’s heart is hard, he or she is far from God. Another example from Pharaoh is **Exodus 8:30-32**, after the plague of flies:

**30**Then Moses left Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord, **31**and the Lord did what Moses asked. The flies left Pharaoh and his officials and his people; not a fly remained. **32**But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

This is a pattern for Pharaoh. With each plague, as the horror of the infestation set in, Pharaoh would swallow his pride and call for Moses. He would try to negotiate with Moses, and offer to let the people go if Moses would only pray to God for the plague to end. But then, as soon as Moses did as he was asked and the irritation of the flies had gone away, Pharaoh would re-neg on his promise and keep the people back.

What’s happening here is that Pharaoh is being stubborn. He is in a contest with God. He is losing. But he is not willing to admit defeat. So with each plague he digs in his heels a little deeper. Each time he loses he grows more recalcitrant. Each time he backs out on Moses he is growing farther and farther from God.

And we can say—the Bible clearly says—this is a choice Pharaoh is making. He is choosing to resist God. He is fighting against the LORD. He is making His heart hard.

In fact, with each of the first 5 plagues, the Bible gives us some variation of “Pharaoh’s heart was hard” or “Pharaoh hardened his heart.” It is not until the sixth plague, the plague of boils, that the Bible says: “But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” (Exodus 9:12)

So, there is a way of interpreting this that would say by the time the Bible says that the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart Pharaoh has already dug in so far that the LORD is merely confirming the choice that Pharaoh made for himself. In other words, it is possible to be so resistant to God that He will abandon you to your sin. If you insist on having your own way with God long enough, He might just let you. He might just allow you to remain in your sinful state of hard heartedness. (cf. Romans 1:24)

I sometimes think of it like this: imagine your heart as a home. Jesus wants to come and live in your heart. He wants to make your heart His home. So we lay out the welcome mat, and we let Jesus in, and we say: “Make yourself at home Jesus. You can go anywhere you like in this house. The whole place is yours! Except…there’s this one room, Jesus, where I’m going to keep the door closed. One room I don’t want to let you into.”

And that one room, of course, is some sinful pattern or habit that we are not ready to let go. Maybe it is bitterness. Maybe it is a tendency to gossip. Maybe it is a selfish spirit. Maybe it is an addiction of some sort. So we give Jesus the run of the house, except for that one room. We keep that door locked, and in that one room we stuff all this bad stuff that we don’t want Jesus to touch.

But we tell ourselves: “One day. One day I’ll open that room up to Jesus. One day, I’ll let Him in to see all that stuff. But I’m not ready to give it up yet. I’m not read to turn it over to Him. Not yet. I want to keep that room to myself.”

And here’s the lesson from the life of Pharaoh. I know I’m mixing my metaphors a little. But when we harden our hearts against God like that, it is possible He’ll leave us to it. We might find that the day will come when we want open that door to Jesus, and we can’t. The lock is rusted shut. There’s too much junk piled up to get the door open.

When we harden a part of our heart toward God, it’s possible that it will get so hard that we no longer want to soften it toward God. I’m not saying that Jesus couldn’t still do a miracle and break through, but we always run the risk that we’ll get so hardened that we never turn that over to Him.

***For This Very Purpose***So, that’s the first answer to the question: Who hardened Pharaoh’s heart? Pharaoh did.

But, of course, the Bible gives a different answer as well. We can also say that **Pharaoh’s heart was hard because God hardened it.** God knew that Pharaoh was going to resist Him. In fact, God designed Pharaoh that way.

The first two references to Pharaoh’s hard heart come as predictions by God. I’ve already shared the one from Exodus 4:21. The other is Exodus 7:3, right before Moses and Aaron go to have the confrontation of staffs turned into serpents. God tells them to go to Pharaoh, **and he says:**

**3**But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, **4**he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. **5**And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.”

God knows that Pharaoh is going to resist. Nothing Pharaoh does comes as a surprise to God. But God is not merely predicting Pharaoh’s stubbornness—the way you might say of your spouse’s reaction to your buying a boat: “Oh, she’s not going to like that”—God’s not merely predicting Pharaoh’s resistance, He’s saying that He will cause it. “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart.” “Pharaoh will not listen to you, Moses, and that’s because I want it that way. That’s how I am going to deliver Israel, and that’s how Egypt is going to know that I am the LORD.”

So when we get to the sixth plague, the plague of boils, and the Bible says in **chapter 9:12:**

**12**But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses.

It means just that: the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart. The LORD chose for Pharaoh to have a hard heart. God chose for Pharaoh to resist His will. God ordained things this way. It says the same thing in chapter 10:1; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10, 14:4; 14:8; and 14:17.

God is sovereign and free. Unlike anybody else in the universe, only God can truly be said to possess free will. Only God is in complete control and free from any outside influence on His choices. And so, if He chose for Pharaoh’s heart to be hard, it was hard. And only God is ultimately free to make that choice.

In fact, God says again and again that He has chosen Pharaoh’s heart to be hard for a reason. In **Exodus 9:16** God says to Pharaoh, through Moses:

**16**But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

God has a purpose for Pharaoh: to show His power so that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth. To accomplish this purpose, God made Pharaoh obstinate and stubborn so that God could unleash the plagues on Egypt and display His awesome power.

It was all part of God’s plan. It’s how God arranged things. God made Pharaoh’s heart hard.

Theologians call this **unconditional election**, which is the idea that God chooses who will follow him without any prior consideration of what we are like or what we will do. God elects—or chooses--those who will have hard hearts and those who will have soft hearts, and he does so without condition.

Now, you might object to this. You might have questions. You’ll say: “How is that fair?” “How can Pharaoh be held responsible for his hard heartedness if it was God who made Pharaoh’s heart hard?” “How can Pharaoh be blamed for not letting the people go if God raised him up for that very purpose?”

And I know that you might have questions because the Bible says you will. In Romans 9 Paul is talking about this very issue when he writes, in **Romans 9:14**:

**14**What then shall we say? Is God unjust?

Is God crooked? Is He being unfair? And **Paul answers** his own question:

Not at all! **15**For he says to Moses,

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
    and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

**16**It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.

Here’s a quote from later in Exodus. Exodus 33:19. This is where Moses begs God for a glimpse of His glory. God can’t allow Moses to see His face, but He hides Moses in the cleft of the rock and He passes by and then lets Moses glimpse His back and as He passes He proclaims His name, the name of the LORD, and this is what He says: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will compassion on whom I have compassion.”

In other words, this is like God’s self-definition. And He’s describing Himself as sovereign. He’s describing Himself as free. He’s saying that He gets to choose. He decides who the people He made will be. He decides who will receive His mercy.

Then Paul goes directly to the story of Pharaoh, and the verse from Exodus 9:**16 that we just looked at:**

**7**For Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” **18**Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

God hardens hearts. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Pharaoh’s heart was hard because God hardened it.

So the Bible’s answer to the question: Who hardened Pharaoh’s heart? is twofold: Pharaoh did. And God did. And the Bible says both answers are true.

***People Smarter than Me***  
This can be tough sledding, so let me quote some people who are smarter than me. Here’s what Philip Ryken says:

[Pharaoh] hardened his own heart; nevertheless, God hardened his heart for him. Both of these statements are true, and there is no contradiction between them. Pharaoh’s will was also God’s will. God not only knew that Pharaoh would refuse to let his people go, but he actually ordained it. This is the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, which is not a puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be adored. As human beings made in the image of God, we make a real choice to accept or reject God, but even the choice we make is governed by God’s sovereign and eternal will. (*Exodus,*p. 129)

[John Piper](:%20http:/www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-hardening-of-pharaoh-and-the-hope-of-the-world) writes:

Now here is the mystery – which is why the opinions of man don’t count for much – people who are hardened against God are really guilty. They have real fault. They are really blameworthy. They really deserve to be judged. And God decided who would be in that condition. If you demand an explanation for HOW this can be – that God decides who is hardened and yet they have real guilt and real fault – there are pointers in the Bible. But they will not satisfy the natural, fallen human mind.

I do not offer that explanation now. I simply assert what I see in the Word: God hardens whom he wills, and man is accountable. God’s hardening does not take away guilt, it renders it certain…

And Walter Kaiser and others, in a book called *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, writes:

So here are two sides of the same reality. On the one hand, people hear the gospel and reject it, just as Pharaoh heard the command of God through Moses and rejected it. There is a true moral choice made by the individual in each case. On the other hand, the sovereign God tells us that he had raised up such a Pharaoh precisely so that he could make that choice. It is no surprise to God when Pharaoh chooses to oppose him…

So, does God harden some people? Paul’s answer is yes…Yet do people freely choose to reject God? Paul’s answer is also yes… How do these two things fit together? Paul never tells us. He knows on the one hand that God is the sovereign ruler of history, shaping it for his own purposes. There is no power that can resist God. He knows on the other hand that people make choices for or against the gospel and all who come to God are accepted by him. He never tries to explain how these two fit together.

The point he is making is that we must never presume on our status with God (“God, of course, will always choose people like us”) or be proud that we are chosen (“God must have seen something great in us”). Each attitude fails to recognize the sovereignty of God…Instead [Paul] counsels us to thankfulness, based on knowing that we are where we are, not because we deserved it, but because God chose to extend his mercy to people like us, a mercy that we did not deserve. (562-563)

***The Potter and the Clay***You probably still have questions. You are probably thinking: “OK. I have responsibility for my choices, but God has already chosen what I will do. I can see that. But since God is more powerful than me, doesn’t His choice really trump mine?” You are probably asking a question like that. At least, Paul expects you to, because here is the next thing he writes **in Romans 9:**

**19**One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?”

That’s the question, isn’t it? And Paul is going to answer it, though not necessarily in the way we want. **Verse 20:**

**20**But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” **21**Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

What Paul is saying here is that it is God’s right, as God, to choose. God has all the rights. He is God. And it is not our place to question God. He is the potter. We are the clay. He can make what He wants out of the clay. From the same lump of earth the potter can make an elaborate vase worthy of display in a museum of art, or he can make a simple bowl for mixing bread dough. It is the potter’s choice. The clay has no say in the matter.  
  
Is that hard to swallow? I think it can be hard to swallow because of our pride. We’d like to think we could dictate terms to God. But that’s not our place.

But keep in mind, the point here is not for us to get hung up on whose heart has been made hard or who is destined for destruction, but for us to be amazed by God’s grace. **Verses 22-24:**

**22**What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? **23**What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—**24**even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

Paul says that we should be stunned—simply stunned— by God’s mercy.

What is stunning to Paul is not what is stunning to us. We are stunned that God would not plan for everyone to be saved. Because, I think, deep down we think that everyone deserves it. Including ourselves. We think that would be fair.

But what is stunning to Paul was that God would show mercy to anyone. Especially us. Because, by rights and by nature, what we all deserve is wrath. If God were truly being fair, if He were only concerned about justice, then we would all be left in the hardness of our hearts and headed for destruction.

But God has shown mercy—glorious mercy—and He saves us through Jesus Christ. And so, Paul’s point in all of this is that we should be utterly stunned by God’s sovereign grace.

***Application***So, this is a hard saying from the Bible: God hardens whom He wants to harden. It’s something theologians have puzzled over for centuries. And I’m sure there are more questions than I have been able to answer in the time I have today. I still have questions.

But let me see if I can wrap this up with some points of application. Let me suggest three.

**First, soften your heart**. It is clear that God held Pharaoh accountable for his hard heart. And it is clear that Pharaoh hardened his heart again and again. So we would all be wise to soften our hearts toward God. **Hebrews 3:15 says**:

**15**As has just been said:

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
    do not harden your hearts  
    as you did in the rebellion.”

Is there some room in your heart that you are keeping off limits to Jesus? Is there are part of your life where you are still in rebellion? Soften your heart.

**Second, pray that God would change your heart.** It is clear that God chooses what happens to our hearts. So if there is going to be softening, we need God to create the change. **Ezekiel 36:26** looks ahead to the new covenant when God promises:

**26**I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

God is the great heart surgeon. He can change your heart, and the heart of those you love and care about. So ask him to do just that.

And then, **third, worship this free and sovereign God.**

This whole discussion reminds us that God is God. He is sovereign. He is free. He has all the rights. And we need to be amazed at how gloriously powerful and autonomous and supreme He is.

And we need to wonder at the mercy He has shown to us.

There is no human reason for our salvation. It’s not because of anything we did good or bad. It’s not because of our willing or running, our desire or effort. It’s because of God.  
  
If you’re saved, it’s because of God. It’s because God has been merciful to you.  
  
If you have put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, then stand amazed at the grace of God. Be stunned that you are included in Christ!  
  
In Romans 11, at the end of 3 whole chapters chewing on this question, this is how Paul concludes. We’ll let this Doxology be the end of our message today. **Romans 11:33-36:**

**33**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
    How unsearchable his judgments,  
    and his paths beyond tracing out!  
**34**“Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
    Or who has been his counselor?”  
**35**“Who has ever given to God,  
    that God should repay them?”  
**36**For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
    To him be the glory forever! Amen.