

## Exodus 4:21

**I. Exodus 4:21a** — And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power.”

This is the first time that we hear anything about Moses performing miracles *before Pharaoh*. But, of course, it makes very good sense. If Moses is going to come to Pharaoh and say “thus says the Lord” (v. 22), and demand that he let the people of Israel go free (v. 23), then it would be very good to have some miracles not only to prove that Moses really is speaking for Yahweh, the God of Israel, but also to prove that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is more powerful than Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. It would be good to have some miracles to show Pharaoh that not only is he morally obligated to obey Yahweh’s word through Moses, but it’s also *in his own best interests*.

So the *basic* point of the miracles is to persuade and convince Pharaoh to listen to Moses and let the people go.<sup>1</sup> That’s the point. The LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, *see* that you *do* before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power.”

**II. Exodus 4:21b** — “But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.”

Moses, *you* do the miracles that I have put in your power (*see* that you do!) – miracles which are intended to persuade and convince Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go. But know that while *you* are doing the miracles, *I* will be hardening Pharaoh’s heart, so that he will *not* let the people go. God says to Moses in Exodus chapter seven:

✓ Exodus 7:2–3 — You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and... Pharaoh will not listen to you.

So: Moses, you and your brother must tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go. But know that while *you* are telling Pharaoh to let the people go, *I* will be hardening Pharaoh’s heart, so that he will *not* let the people go.

And right away, we all say: “Something’s not right here. I must not be hearing that correctly. There must be something I’m missing.” One commentator says: “God will actually *keep* Pharaoh from heeding the signs—he will harden Pharaoh’s heart (i.e., *make him* stubborn). There is little one can do to make this verse say something different.” (Enns; emphasis mine) Or is there? Is this really what the text says? There are many who would disagree.

### **III. What is our problem?**

Well, first of all, what’s our problem? What are we all up in arms about? It’s simple, isn’t it? How can God *keep* Pharaoh from heeding the signs by *making* his heart stubborn, and yet Pharaoh still be *free* to make his *own voluntary* choice as a *morally responsible* human being?

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<sup>1</sup> The miracles that God has given Moses to perform are all the miracles that he is about to perform in chapters 4-14 (they are not coterminous with the three signs that Moses is to perform before the Israelites; cf. Stuart).

Let me ask the question again. How can God *keep* Pharaoh from heeding the signs by *making* his heart stubborn, and yet Pharaoh still be *free* to make his *own voluntary* choice as a *morally responsible* human being? The moment we try to answer that question—in other words, the moment we try to make the “problem” go away), that’s the moment we’ve fallen into grave and serious error.<sup>2</sup>

#### **IV. What is our responsibility?**

Never have I tried to answer that question, and I’m not going to start trying this morning. Rather than trying to answer the question, *our responsibility* is to diligently work to safeguard and maintain the mystery – for our own spiritual well-being and for the glory of God. So how do we safeguard and maintain the mystery? Really, it’s just by working very, very diligently—and by the grace of God—to let the Bible speak for itself.

But before we spend some time this morning affirming and safeguarding the goodness, and beauty, and power of the mystery, let’s notice that *Moses* apparently doesn’t have the same problem we have. For all the arguments he’s made so far, he never says to God, “What? How can you say that *you* are going to make Pharaoh’s heart stubborn and keep him from heeding the miracles if the *point* of the miracles that *You Yourself* have given me is to persuade and convince Pharaoh to let Israel go?” So why doesn’t Moses argue?

It wasn’t until Aristotle and the Greek philosophers 1100 years later that the *mystery* was “officially” turned into a *contradiction*. This explains why Moses never argues the point, but 1600 years later when Paul refers to this same story of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart, he knows right away what people are going to say to him: “Why does [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?” (Rom. 9:19) A lot had changed since the days of Moses. Paul was now writing to people whose lives and thinking had been powerfully influenced by Greek philosophy (as have ours). But rather than try to “answer” the question, and make the “problem” go away, Paul simply works to safeguard and affirm the mystery – for the spiritual well-being of the Church and for the glory of God. We’ll see this in just a few minutes.

So how do we safeguard and affirm the mystery? *What does the Bible say?*

#### **V. First things first**

Well this idea of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is a huge deal in Exodus. Over, and over, and over again we’re going to hear of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart – many times without any mention of who caused the hardening, and a few times with a very clear statement that Pharaoh himself hardened his *own* heart. Let’s look at all the different passages where we see the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. (See chart at end of sermon)

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<sup>2</sup> The Arminians and the Hyper Calvinists have both tried to answer the question, and both have fallen into error. The Calvinists are the only ones who have not tried to answer the question, and so I believe they are the only ones who have not fallen into error.

So what are we supposed to make of this? What does it all mean? The first thing we need to say is that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and the hardening of anyone's heart (whether by ourselves or by God) is in some sense always the result of prior sin. Remember that as a result of our sin *in Adam*, we are all *born* into this world as sinners with a sin nature. (cf. Rom. 5:12-14; Eph. 2:1-3) But this doesn't solve the problem of why God hardens some *in their sin*, but not others. We know it's certainly not because some are better than others, or more naturally soft to his touch!

## **VI. Can we make the “problem” go away?**

So there are many who work very diligently to answer our questions and make the mystery go away. Listen to how one commentator sums up what many others also say:

“The hardening [of Pharaoh's heart] was *as much* Pharaoh's own act as it was the work of God. Even more significant is the fact that *Pharaoh alone* was the agent of the hardening in the first sign and in all the first five plagues. Not until the sixth plague... was it stated that *God actually moved in* and hardened Pharaoh's heart (9:12), as he had warned Moses in Midian that he would *have* to do (v.21).” (VanGemeren)

Do you see what he's saying? He assumes that if the text says that Pharaoh hardens his heart, then this means that Pharaoh “*alone*” was hardening his heart, with God not in any way involved. In other words, he assumes that if Pharaoh is the one who hardens his heart, then it's *impossible* to *also* say that *God* was hardening Pharaoh's heart. In other words, only *one* “person” at a time can possibly be hardening Pharaoh's heart. Now that might make good sense to us, but is that really what the *Bible* says?

We've seen the first step to answering the question, and making the mystery go away. The next step is to say that *in the beginning*, *Pharaoh* is the only one who repeatedly hardens his heart—God is not involved in the beginning. Instead, one commentator says that at first, God is repeatedly “attempt[ing] to soften Pharaoh's heart.” (Hamilton) It's only *after* Pharaoh hardens his own heart in spite of God's repeated attempts to soften it that God finally “moves in” – only because He “has to” – and now hardens Pharaoh's heart Himself. And so the answer to all our questions is complete, and we find out that all along the “mystery” was only in our imagination.

But is this really what the *Bible* says? And have we really made the mystery go away? Maybe you're thinking that it still doesn't seem “fair” that God should harden Pharaoh's heart even at the end. If God has to harden Pharaoh's heart at the end, is this because otherwise Pharaoh might still have repented, and avoided more death and destruction? One commentator says that when God finally does move in to harden Pharaoh's heart, He “terminates[s] Pharaoh's ability to act of his own accord... After the seventh plague... the door on further autonomous [independent, self-directed] behavior is slammed shut.” (Hamilton) But is this what the Bible says? Is God's hardening of the human heart the same thing as terminating our ability to make voluntary choices of our own? Not all commentators would want to say the same thing, but the logic of their argument actually requires it.<sup>3</sup> You see, in attempting to answer our questions and solve the

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<sup>3</sup> Motyer writes: “It is possible to tell two stories about Pharaoh's heart... One is the story of Pharaoh's moral choices, whereby his heart became increasingly ‘set in its ways’, committed more and more irretrievably to a course

mystery, we've actually created a very, very *real problem*. So what do we do? Is there some other way to answer our questions and make the mystery go away?

Maybe we should say that both Pharaoh and God *are* involved at the same time in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but still not simultaneously. In other words, each time that Pharaoh hardens his heart, God responds by doing Himself what Pharaoh has already done, and hardening Pharaoh's heart. But then, of course, God's "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart becomes a farce. And more importantly, we still have to ask the question: Is this what the Bible says?

Finally, there are many of us who get tired of the debate and the questions and so we say, "I don't really care. There are more important things to think about. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Sounds like a contradiction to me, but I guess we'll figure it out in heaven." There are two problems with this attitude. First of all, we won't figure it out in heaven. For all eternity it will be a mystery. But at least in heaven, as we stand in the very presence of God, we will never cease to love and embrace the mystery. And so also here in this life, God has shown us this mystery for His *glory*, and for our *good*. God has shown us this mystery in the story of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart so that we might humbly embrace it and love it. Therefore, no one is ever "allowed" to say: "I don't really care. It's too hard to understand." So let's look at what the Bible says.

## **VII. What does the Bible say?**

Notice that God says twice, *before the fact*, what **He** is going to do.<sup>4</sup> (See chart) Notice, too, that God doesn't say: "Though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you, so I will harden Pharaoh's heart"! Brothers and sisters, there really should be no confusion here. There should be no debate.

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of genocide regarding Israel. The other is a *mere statement* that from the *perspective* of the Lord as moral ruler of his world, the point of no return had been reached and the hardness of Pharaoh's heart *must not be judgmentally imposed on him as the justly due consequence of what his own choices had made him*." (Motyer) Motyer turns God's sovereign, "I will" into a "mere statement" of fact – one that God has seen from His clear "perspective." But as with Hamilton in the next footnote, Motyer's assessment is not only not supported in the text (see sermon), but it's ultimately a very serious (though certainly unintentional) slander and undermining of the sovereignty of God.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 2:30 — But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day.

Joshua 11:19–20 — There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon. They took them all in battle. For it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the LORD commanded Moses.

1 Kings 12:13–15 — And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

Judges 14:3–4 (cf. 2 Sam. 24:1; Judges 9:23–24) — But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes." His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines.

But now notice that as the story moves forward, every kind of statement—whether it’s just said that Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, or that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, or that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart—all three statements are carefully *founded and rooted* in God’s initial sovereign decree. (See chart; quotation of purpose clause, and “as the Lord had said”<sup>5</sup>) When the text says that “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, *as the Lord had said*” we’re meant to hear this *in the light* of God’s initial sovereign decree: “*I* will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and... [he] will not listen to you.” When the text says, “*Pharaoh*... hardened his heart... and he did not let the people of Israel go, *just as the Lord had spoken through Moses*” we’re meant to hear this *in the light* of God’s initial sovereign decree: “*I* will harden [Pharaoh’s] heart, *so that* he will not let the people go.” And, of course, when the text says, “*The Lord* hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, *as the Lord had spoken to Moses*,” we’re obviously meant to hear this also as a fulfillment of God’s initial sovereign decree when He said: “*I* will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and... [he] will not listen to you.” Finally, we notice that when the text switches to *only* saying that *God* hardened Pharaoh’s heart, the phrase “as He said” drops out completely, because now it’s already clear that Pharaoh’s hardening is ultimately due to God’s sovereign decree (there’s no longer any real need to add the reminder).

Why was it so important to be reminded that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was rooted in God’s sovereign decree? First, so that we might know that Pharaoh is not sovereign – *God* is.<sup>6</sup> And so therefore, secondly, to be encouraged and strengthened in the midst of set backs and apparent defeats. Listen to what Calvin writes:

“Now, therefore, God exhorts [Moses] to perseverance; and although he might perceive after three or four miracles that the obstinacy of the king was indomitable, still that he should not turn back, nor be discouraged, but should continue even unto the end. This, then, is the sum, that he should not faint nor fail, when he saw the [apparent futility] of his first efforts; nor cease to contend boldly till he had fulfilled all the objects of his vocation. Moreover... God himself foretells that... whatsoever should seem to oppose the deliverance of his people would arise from his own secret counsel. Thus He shows Moses the reason why he should not stop until he had performed all the miracles...” (Calvin)

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<sup>5</sup> Hamilton asks, “Does ‘just as the Lord had said’ refer to a divine decree, or is this the narrator’s comment that what God has said (prophetically) of Pharaoh’s behavior is indeed coming to pass.” (There should be a question mark after this sentence.) The answer to Hamilton’s question is found in God’s “I will” (versus “Pharaoh will”). To say that when God says, “I will,” He is simply predicting something that will happen is a very serious slander and attack (though certainly unintentional) on the sovereignty of God by any and every definition. Hamilton goes on to reference McAfee: “McAfee helpfully observes that the phrase [‘as He said’] never directly modifies any sentence describing Pharaoh’s heart. Rather, the phrase in every instance appears on the heels of two previous clauses; for example, 7:13: ‘(1) Yet Pharaoh’s heart became hard, (2) and he would not listen to them, (3) just as the Lord had said.’ The most likely antecedent for these ‘he would not listen’ in five out of six of the notations, argues McAfee, is 7:3-4: ‘and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you.’” It is inexplicable why either McAfee or Hamilton (or both) chose to leave out the opening words of verse 7:3: “*I will harden Pharaoh’s heart*, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you.” The argument that “as he said” “never directly modifies any sentence describing Pharaoh’s heart” is technically true, but the conclusion is false (if not dishonest) in so far as Pharaoh’s refusal to listen is explicitly and logically *linked* to the hardening of his heart (*cause and effect*).

<sup>6</sup> “The word for ‘harden’ bears the idea of Pharaoh’s maintaining a strong, determined will not to accede to the Hebrews’ demands. God is the cause of that hardening... That Yahweh controls the heart of Pharaoh is the basic point of the account.” (Currid)

Brothers and sisters, there is infinite, strong comfort and assurance when we know that nothing in this world is of chance, but all is according to God's "secret counsel," and sovereign decree. What unconquerable peace this thought must give us. And how we must then be brought to our knees in awe and reverence to *worship* and *exalt* our glorious God!

But then we might ask: "If the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is ultimately, every time, the result of God's sovereign decree, then why does the Bible even bother to say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart? And the answer is this: "***Because it's true***; and because it's exceedingly important that we humbly and joyfully recognize, and affirm, and maintain this mystery. There are some who might try to make the mystery go away by saying that Pharaoh only hardened his heart because God *made* him do it, every time – as though Pharaoh was just a puppet on strings. But this is an obvious slander and attack on the goodness and justice of God. The text is explicit: "Pharaoh—hardened—his heart," not because he was forced or coerced, but because it was his own ***voluntary, unforced*** decision. God Himself says to Moses: "Pharaoh's heart is hard; he refuses to let the people go." (7:22) *Clearly*, God is holding Pharaoh morally responsible for his own voluntary choice. We see this also when God says to Pharaoh four times: "***If you*** refuse to let [my people] go..." (8:2, 21; 9:2; 10:4) And finally, we read in Exodus chapter nine: "But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, ***he sinned yet again*** and hardened his heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go." (9:34-35) If Pharaoh's stubbornness is "sin," then clearly he is not being "forced" to do *anything* by God, but rather his stubbornness is his own voluntary choice. Remember what James writes:

- ✓ James 1:13-14 — Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

There are no "puppets on strings" in this world, and when we know this, it encourages us to seek God earnestly for His mercy and grace. We're reminded that our choices matter, and so we must all be careful to heed God's exhortation:

- ✓ Psalm 95:8 — Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.
- ✓ Deuteronomy 10:16 (cf. Prov. 28:14) — Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn [hard].
- ✓ 2 Chronicles 30:8 — Do not now be stiff-necked [hard-necked] as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD.

And so we, too, urge and exhort our children, we plead with the unsaved, we pray, and we strive, and we work – because all of these things ***matter***.

So now we might end up asking the *opposite* of our last question! If the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is truly his own voluntary choice, then why also say that God hardens Pharaoh's heart? Well, we've already seen *why* this is so important. But *how* is it ***possible*** that Pharaoh's voluntary hardening of his own heart should be rooted in God's prior sovereign decree that *He* would harden Pharaoh's heart? One commentator speaks for many when he actually says that this simply *isn't* possible:

“If, in fact, Pharaoh’s refusal is a certainty [because of God’s sovereign decree], then to hold it out as a possibility [to say that Pharaoh is still able to make a voluntary choice] is deceitful.” (Fretheim; quoted in Hamilton)

Brothers and sisters, this is nothing less than to substitute the authority and reasoning of *man* for the authority and word of *God*. What this commentator (along with numerous other Christians) states as a matter of fact is what others more respectfully, but just as wrongly, have chosen to say in the form of a question: “[If ‘God has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills’], why does He still find fault? For who can resist his will?” (Rom. 9:18–19) But the Apostle Paul never backs down. Instead, he boldly affirms and maintains the *mystery* – “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?” (Rom. 9:20) He boldly affirms and maintains the *mystery* that on the one hand Pharaoh’s refusal is *certain* precisely *because of* God’s sovereign decree (“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart”), while on the other hand, Pharaoh is in every way morally responsible for his refusal because it is his own free and voluntary choice.<sup>7</sup>

This is the mystery. Even our *free, and voluntary, and “uncoerced”*(!!!) choices are all ultimately founded and rooted in God’s “secret counsel” and sovereign decree. Notice that we do not say God’s simple “permission,” or “allowance.” God does not say: “I will allow Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened.” God says clearly and explicitly in his Word: “**I will harden** Pharaoh’s heart, *so that* he will not let the people go.”<sup>8</sup> Calvin writes:

“We should remember that God’s judgments are not without reason called a ‘great deep’ ... therefore, let us regard them with admiration [and reverence] and not with [arguments]. But those who substitute his permission in the place of his act, not only deprive him of his authority as a judge, but in their [discontent], subject him to a weighty reproach, since they grant him no more of justice than their senses can understand.”  
(Calvin)

## Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, may we not be guilty of granting God no more of justice than our senses can understand. We must learn to humbly—trustfully—*submit* ourselves and our reasoning to God’s word. May we humbly, diligently, and gladly *embrace* the mystery because God has shown it to us for His glory and for our good.

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<sup>7</sup> Once we embrace the true mystery as God has actually revealed it in His word, there is no need for the qualification that Hamilton makes when he says: “It would be incorrect to think that because Pharaoh’s refusal to listen is due to his God-hardened heart, then anybody’s and everybody’s refusal to listen to God’s voice is God-ordained and God-purposed.” Hamilton goes on to quote Goldingay: “The specialness of the situation in this story means that what Yhwh does here is not necessarily a guide to what God regularly does—only to what he *can* do.” The truth of God’s word not only reveals that this qualification is unnecessary (cf. Hamilton’s fatalistic understanding of God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart), but also that it’s unbiblical (see sermon). The Apostle Paul himself draws from the story of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart a pattern for God’s universal, sovereign dealings with all mankind (Rom. 9:14-24).

<sup>8</sup> “God’s providence over sinful actions does not occur by simple permission but by a form of permission that God most wisely and powerfully limits and in other ways arranges and governs.” (2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession)

**I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.** (4:21)

**I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you.** (7:2-4)

**Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them,** (7:13)  
**as the LORD had said.**

**Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them,** (7:14)  
**as the LORD had said.**

**Pharaoh's heart is hard; he refuses to let the people go.** (7:22)

**[Pharaoh] hardened his heart and would not listen to them,** (8:15)  
**as the LORD had said.**

**Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them,** (8:19)  
**as the LORD had said.**

**Pharaoh hardened his heart** this time also, and **did not let the people go.** (8:32)

**The heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.** (9:7)

**The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them,** (9:12)  
**as the LORD had spoken to Moses.**

**[Pharaoh]... hardened his heart...** (9:34)  
**so the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go,** (9:35)  
**just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.**

**I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants.** (10:1)

**The LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.** (10:20)

**The LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.** (10:27)

**The LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.** (11:10)

**I will harden Pharaoh's heart.** (14:4)

**The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh.** (14:8)

**I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians.** (14:17-18)